

# MAKING the GRADE

FALL 2006



Writing is a skill that everyone needs but one that tends to trip many students. What do teachers look for in evaluating students' writing? How can parents partner with their children's teachers to help foster good writing skills? How can parents encourage their children to develop writing skills during the school year? This tabloid provides a variety of activities and ideas to boost students' writing skills and to take the mystery out of writing.

# WRITING IS A FOUNDATION SKILL IN NORTH CAROLINA SCHOOLS

Writing is a foundation skill for public school students in North Carolina. Beginning in kindergarten and continuing through every grade until high school graduation, students are expected to build, enhance and strengthen their writing skills to prepare them for success in life.

“Futurists say that today’s students will need to build a high level of literacy in order to be successful,” State Superintendent of Public Instruction June Atkinson said. “This means that students will need to be strong readers and thoughtful writers as well as good problem solvers and critical thinkers. Writing is a skill that allows students to integrate everything they are learning and create unique work that reflects their abilities and ideas. Writing appears throughout North Carolina’s curriculum—at every grade—because it is such an essential skill.”

Younger students – kindergarten through second-grade – learn the physical aspects of writing. They develop a vocabulary that they can spell and strategies for spelling new words. They develop a sense of the conventions of writing – punctuation and grammar. Students in the early grades learn to write simple stories, letters and other forms. This work is done alongside reading instruction and other kinds of learning.

These skills continue to build in grades 3-5 as students increase greater mastery of standard grammar and language conventions. They move from writing sentences to paragraphs and short essays, and students begin writing for different purposes. For example, students learn to write informational material, personal narratives, letters and reports. Students in upper elementary school begin to learn about writing for the needs and interests of a specific audience.

In middle school, the skills and processes learned in elementary school continue. Students still write for different purposes, different audiences and in different forms. They are held to an increasingly higher standard for writing conventions and grammar as they work to write informational, argumentative, critical and literary pieces. Linkages are important in middle school writing. Students at this level should make connections between their writing and reading, life experiences and learning in the sciences, social studies, mathematics and other disciplines.

High school students continue building their writing skills to develop greater control and sophisticated use of language for different purposes. Students at the high school level should be able to make good decisions about appropriate writing forms for specific purposes and audiences. In high school, students should be writing intensively across the curriculum, reading widely and deeply in diverse genres and traditions, and they should see connections among the skills and knowledge they are developing in all their courses as well as in their life outside school. High school students, especially, should be aware and able to use writing processes to help them write purposefully and strategically. Students at this level should generate ideas, organize and prioritize, rethink and revise language and ideas and edit their own work.

Their written materials, regardless of purpose or form, should provide a sense of organization, movement and closure. By the time they graduate, high school students should be able to write a variety of things – letters, essays, research papers, journals, Web pages and other forms – to express their own ideas.

*“The use of oral and written language sets human beings apart from other forms of life and allows for the expression of the human spirit, the development of ethical responsibility and the ability to interact with and influence others. Indeed, it is this use of language which challenges us to examine and clarify our thinking as we search for the best means to communicate our thoughts and ideas”*

– N.C. Standard Course of Study,  
English Language Arts



## NORTH CAROLINA ASSESSMENTS EMPHASIZE WRITING INSTRUCTION

In 1983-84, the State Board of Education, recognizing the importance of writing instruction for every student, instituted a statewide assessment of writing for sixth and ninth graders. Today, writing assessments are given to students in grades 4, 7 and 10. Writing is incorporated into the curriculum at every grade level even though assessments are given at three grades only. The fourth grade assessment, for example, should reflect learning that has occurred for students in kindergarten through fourth grade.

The writing assessments are given in March for all students, although exceptions are made for some students with disabilities and some students with limited English proficiency. In these cases, students take an alternate assessment to gauge their writing proficiency.

Students are given a writing prompt that requires them to respond with a specific type of writing. For example, in the 2005-06 school year, fourth graders were assessed on an extended narrative response (personal or imaginative). Seventh graders were asked to give an extended argumentative response (problem/solution or evaluative) and 10th graders were asked to give an extended informational response (definition or cause/effect). The prompts at each grade level are developed, revised and reviewed by teachers and other educators and are field-tested with students before being used in an actual assessment.

Students in grades 4 and 7 receive one hour and 15 minutes in which to respond; 10th grade students receive one hour and 40 minutes. Students earn scores based on the content of

their responses as well as on their use of correct sentence formation, usage, mechanics and spelling. Students earn scores that range from a minimum of four to a maximum of 20. Two independent readers score each student essay.

In order to be considered proficient, students must earn a score of 12 or higher. Scores on the writing assessments are reported according to the following achievement levels: Level I, 4-7; Level II, 8-11; Level III, 12-16; and Level IV, 17-20. On the most recent writing assessment reports from June 2005, 50 percent of fourth grade students scored proficient. A total of 46.2 percent of seventh graders scored proficient. For 10th graders, 53.2 percent of students scored proficient.

# ONE WORD AT A TIME: 20 WAYS TO ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILD TO WRITE

Parents know that writing is important for school success and success in adulthood. Even the SAT, the most commonly used college admission examination taken by North Carolina students, recently incorporated writing as a tested component.

But these facts don't make it any easier to coax young people to write. Here are some activities that can get your children writing.

## For everyone:

- Read a variety of literature and non-fiction. By reading newspapers, novels, non-fiction, magazines and even Web sites, students learn writing techniques and features from the examples. Newspapers alone include dozens of kinds of informational writing.
- Have each family member keep his or her own travelogue while on vacation or on out of town trips. When you return home, share your travelogues with each other. How are they the same? How are they different?

## Elementary

- Create your own recipe for your favorite food – or a recipe for “my perfect summer” or some other non-food item.
- Keep a simple journal throughout the school year. Choose a notebook without lines so the child can illustrate his or her ideas.
- Are you planning on taking a trip? Encourage your child to write a postcard to grandparents or other friends.
- In the newspaper, have your child count how many different kinds of writing he or she can find (news accounts, opinion, humor, advice columns, fiction, letters to the editor, cartoons, horoscopes, advertising). Encourage your child to create his or her own version of a favorite type of newspaper writing.
- Lists are fun for younger writers. Have your child make a list of his or her best summer activities, including new skills learned, books read, movies seen or new foods eaten, for example.
- Allow your child to use stickers, inkpad stamps or even magazine or newspaper photos to create a story illustration. Then have your child write his or her own story.



## Middle Grades

- Is your family planning a get-together? If so, encourage your child to have older family members tell stories about their lives. Have your child write these down. He or she could consider sharing the stories with your extended family.
- Supplement the oral history stories collected at family events with articles from newspapers, magazines and other periodicals of the time being described.
- Middle schoolers are the perfect age for keeping a diary or journal. The journal could have a theme, such as the news of the day and how he or she viewed it.
- Encourage your child to write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper on a topic of special interest to him or her.
- Encourage your child to choose a favorite newspaper comic strip and cut it out of the newspaper. Encourage him or her to write a letter to the strip's artist/author, create a new plot idea for the strip or even develop his or her own comic strip.

## High School

- High school students will soon be writing college admissions essays. Encourage your child to get a head start on this process by writing a narrative about what he or she would like to be as an adult. How would college help prepare him or her for this future plan?
- Does your family do an annual letter to distant friends? Consider letting your high school student gather the news of your family and write the annual family letter (with you acting as editor, of course!).
- Was there a news story that captured your family's imagination this summer? Is there a news item that is often discussed at the family dinner table? Encourage your child to use the news story as a basis for a fictionalized version that he or she writes.
- High school students enjoy music. Encourage your child to write his or her own song lyrics. Extra bonus: base the song lyrics on a news story in your community.
- Haiku is a Japanese form of poetry with a set form of three lines composed of five syllables, seven syllables and five syllables. Have a family contest to see who can write the best haiku describing your family's summer.
- Instant messaging can be a form of writing. Have your child try writing poetry in an instant messaging format.

# SAMPLE WRITING ASSESSMENT PROMPTS

What do the writing assessments look like? Below are the three writing assessment prompts used in 2005.

## Grade 4: Extended narrative response (personal or imaginative)

"Imagine you were walking outside and you saw a huge tree. When you got closer, you noticed that there was a small door in the side of the tree. You opened the door. Write a story about what happened the time you saw a huge tree and opened the door."

## Grade 7: Extended argumentative response (problem/solution or evaluative)

"At the end of every school year, your principal chooses one way the school could be improved. Your principal bases the choice on recommendations from students. This year, students have proposed the following improvements:

- an outdoor lunch area
- new sports equipment for the gym
- laptop computers for student checkout

Write a letter to your principal justifying which improvement would be best in your school."

## Grade 10: Extended information response (definition, cause/effect or problem/solution)

"Write an article for a school newspaper about the meaning of individuality as it relates to being a member of a group. You may use the following information, your own experiences, observations and/or readings."

(The following quotations were provided as part of the prompt.)

*"Individuality: 1. The quality of being individual; distinctiveness. 2. The aggregate of qualities and characteristics that distinguish one from others."*  
Source: Webster's II New College Dictionary

*"To put the world right in order, we must first put the nation in order; to put the nation in order, we must first put the family in order; to put the family in order, we must first cultivate our personal life; we must first set our hearts right."* Source: Confucius

*"It is not worth an intelligent man's time to be in the majority. By definition, there are already enough people to do that."* Source: G.H. Hardy

*"Don't compromise yourself. You are all you've got."*  
Source: Janis Joplin

*"The whole course of human history may depend on a change of heart in one solitary and even humble individual – for it is in the solitary mind and soul of the individual that the battle between good and evil is waged and ultimately won or lost."*  
Source: M. Scott Peck

*"The thing that makes you exceptional, if you are at all, is inevitably that which makes you lonely."*  
Source: Lorraine Hansberry

*"No snowflake in an avalanche ever feels responsible."*  
Source: Voltaire

# WRITING ASSESSMENT RESULTS: HOW DO THEY COUNT?

The North Carolina Writing Assessments results are reported annually each spring after the assessments are completed and scored, usually in June. The writing assessments' scores are important indicators for local teachers and principals to use in evaluating student performance. When students do not pass the writing assessments, this will not necessarily result in the student being retained or affect their grade for the year, but it is a signal to their teachers that additional emphasis and instruction in writing is needed for these students.

In addition to the student-level uses for the assessment, writing assessment results are included in each school's performance composite. This percentage indicates the proportion of test scores in a particular school that are at or above proficiency. The 2006-07 school year is the first time in a number of years that the writing assessments will be included in the performance composite calculated for each school.

Tenth grade writing assessment results are incorporated in the calculations for Adequate Yearly Progress, a measure required by the federal education law, No Child Left Behind.



## FOR MORE INFORMATION

There are a number of resources available online for parents who would like additional information on writing and how to develop this essential skill in their child.

**North Carolina Department of Public Instruction,  
Accountability Services Division**  
[www.ncpublicschools.org/accountability/testing/writing/](http://www.ncpublicschools.org/accountability/testing/writing/)

**North Carolina Department of Public Instruction,  
North Carolina Standard Course of Study,  
English Language Arts Curriculum**  
[www.ncpublicschools.org/curriculum/languagearts/scos/](http://www.ncpublicschools.org/curriculum/languagearts/scos/)

**U.S. Department of Education,  
Office of Educational Research and Improvement**  
[www.ed.gov/pubs/parents/Writing/index.html](http://www.ed.gov/pubs/parents/Writing/index.html)

**National Education Association**  
[www.nea.org/parents/ppower.html](http://www.nea.org/parents/ppower.html)

**The National Council of Teachers of English**  
[www.ncte.org/parents](http://www.ncte.org/parents)

**LEO: Literacy Education Online, St. Cloud State University**  
[leo.stcloudstate.edu/](http://leo.stcloudstate.edu/)

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DEVELOPING GOOD WRITERS



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