



Exemplar Early High School Writing Test Prompt



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Introduction

This booklet explains the ACT Aspire Early High School Writing test by presenting a sample test prompt. The prompt is accompanied by its depth-of-knowledge (DOK) level,¹ an explanation of the task the prompt poses, ideas for improvement, and more. The exemplar test prompt included here is representative of the range of content and types of questions found on the ACT Aspire Early High School Writing test. Educators can use this resource in several ways:

- Become familiar with ACT Aspire Writing test prompts.
- Help reinforce or adjust teaching and learning objectives.
- Learn how ACT Aspire improvement idea statements can help students identify key skills they have not yet mastered.

Writing Framework

The ACT Aspire Writing assessments consist of 30-minute summative writing tasks for grades 3 through 8 and early high school (grades 9 and 10). They ask students at each grade level to respond in essay form to a single writing stimulus. The assessments are designed to provide a strong indication of whether students have the writing skills they will need to succeed as they begin work at their next grade level. Student responses are evaluated according to analytic rubrics that assess the generation, development, organization, and communication of ideas in standard written English.

Taken as a whole, the ACT Aspire Writing assessments are intended to reflect an integrated continuum of writing ability that advances in skill and complexity grade by grade. This continuum culminates in the ACT® Writing Test, which provides a measure of student readiness for the writing demands of college. The ACT Aspire assessments cover Common Core State Standards that pertain to writing as well as the ACT College and Career Readiness Standards, which are derived from ACT research.

¹ Norman L. Webb, "Depth-of-Knowledge Levels for Four Content Areas," last modified March 28, 2002, <http://facstaff.wisc.edu/normw/All%20content%20areas%20%20DOK%20levels%2032802.doc>.

Foundations

The ACT Aspire assessments represent an extension into earlier grades of the philosophy of writing and assessment found in established ACT high school writing tests—the ACT Writing Test and the ACT QualityCore® English constructed-response assessments. The ACT Writing Test was designed from extensive research identifying the essential skills needed for success in entry-level college writing. Data validate that test takers who perform adequately on the ACT Writing Test are likely to succeed in their first-year college composition courses. Thus our claim that the ACT Writing Test is a reliable measure of a student’s readiness for college-level writing is supported with empirical evidence.

The ACT QualityCore End-of-Course Assessments are designed to help more high school students achieve the level of writing readiness they will need for college and career success. ACT QualityCore took shape from *On Course for Success*, a research project conducted by ACT and The Education Trust, which examined the curricula of high schools where students excel despite facing socioeconomic challenges.² ACT then built the ACT QualityCore assessments around the high academic standards found in these schools, with the intention of helping more schools understand and incorporate into their classrooms the level of academic rigor needed for their students’ success. There are four ACT QualityCore constructed-response assessments, one at each grade from 9 through 12. The demanding 45-minute tests encourage critical thinking and accomplished composition in the modes of reflective narrative (grade 9), literary analysis (grade 10), persuasive writing (grade 11), and expository writing (grade 12).

The ACT Aspire Writing assessments draw upon this rich research base for their design and reflect the same principles of writing that are found in the ACT Writing Test and in the ACT QualityCore constructed-response assessments. One key to ensuring this continuity is the ACT Writing Competencies Model.

ACT Writing Competencies Model

The ACT Writing Competencies Model derives from the ACT Writing Test, the ACT QualityCore English constructed-response assessments, and all of the research, standards, experience, and evidence these tests embody. It serves as the means by which ACT has extended its philosophy of writing and writing assessment into the ACT Aspire tests.

The model provides a high-level description of the features of writing that ACT believes are essential to assess in order to support our claims about student readiness. The ACT Aspire tasks and rubrics are derived from the Writing Competencies Model in that they reflect, in a grade-appropriate way, the portrait of competent writing broadly depicted there.

One key assertion that emerges from the model is that ideas are the underlying currency of the competent writing students need to be able to produce in their academic careers and future work lives. As reflected in the model, competent student writing entails generating, developing, sustaining, organizing, and communicating ideas. This model of writing has basic

² ACT and The Education Trust, *On Course for Success: A Close Look at Selected High School Courses That Prepare All Students for College and Work* (Iowa City, IA: ACT, 2004).

similarities to other widely accepted models, including the Six + 1 model that has been adapted by the National Writing Project.³ The ACT model also finds many parallels with the 2011 writing framework used by the National Assessment of Education Progress.⁴

Generating Ideas

Regardless of the topic or content of a piece of writing, the writer must think of something to say about a subject. That “something” consists of ideas that arise through the writer’s invention in response to a rhetorical situation that prompts the writer to explain, to persuade, or to give a narrative account. The quality of the ideas generated by the writer can be judged according to how acutely the ideas address the rhetorical situation and by how productive they are of judgment, analysis, or reflection.

Competent writers understand the rhetorical situation—the issue or question they are invited to respond to, the purpose for which they are writing, the audience for their work—and they generate ideas that are pertinent and fitting given the situation. Writers with greater levels of ability generate ideas in consideration of the implications and complications surrounding their topic, the values that underlie particular positions or actions, or the multiple perspectives that complicate an issue. It does not matter whether the focus of the student’s ideas is grand or mundane, familiar or highly original; rather, what matters most is the degree to which the student’s ideas lead to astute judgment, insightful analysis, or meaningful reflection.

Developing Ideas

A writer makes ideas clear to the reader by explaining and exploring them, discussing their implications, or illustrating them through example. In developing ideas, the competent writer draws general principles from specific, detailed discussion. As readers, we discover how apt and productive the writer’s ideas are through their development. Development is the means by which a writer supports a thesis, arrives at insights into the topic, or conveys the meaning and significance of the narrative.

Sustaining Ideas

For a piece of writing to succeed in its purpose, ideas must be focused. A competent writer is judicious in the ideas presented in the essay and will make productive use of all of them. The reader will grasp the relationships among the ideas in the essay and will understand the writer’s purpose throughout. From beginning to end, the essay will comprise a sustained treatment of relevant ideas.

³ Ruth Culham, *6+1 Traits of Writing: The Complete Guide* (New York: Scholastic, 2003); and Sherry Seale Swain and Paul LeMahieu, “Assessment in a Culture of Inquiry: The Story of the National Writing Project’s Analytic Writing Continuum,” in *Writing Assessment in the 21st Century: Essays in Honor of Edward M. White*, ed. Norbert Elliot and Les Perelman (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2012): 45–66.

⁴ The ACT model also finds many parallels with the 2011 writing framework used by the National Assessment of Education Progress. Regarding the 2011 NAEP Writing Assessment framework, Hilary Persky writes, “Although the draft guides in the framework are similar to the previous guides in their holistic nature and emphasis on development, organization, and language use, they do focus more on how well students cope with ideas, not just in terms of clarity and level of detail, but also in terms of level of insight and approach. Further, the guides explicitly state that the three broad domains of writing be assessed in terms of how well a specific purpose and audience are addressed; this includes the interesting addition in the language domain of voice and tone.” “Writing Assessment in the Context of the National Assessment of Educational Progress,” *Writing Assessment in the 21st Century*, 69–86.

Organizing Ideas

A competent piece of writing is skillfully organized. Its ideas are presented in a sequence that makes clear their relationship to one another and that guides the reader through the essay in a purposeful way. A writer must organize ideas successfully in order to build a logical argument, provide a clear explanation, or relay a coherent sequence of events. More skillful writers organize ideas in ways that create unity in the essay and that enhance purpose: for example, an argumentative essay that persuades through the momentum it achieves in sequencing logical inferences, an expository essay that arrives at insight through progressively finer distinctions, a narrative essay that braids the author’s reflection throughout its telling of a story. Organizational choices are integral to effective writing.

Communicating Ideas

At the minimum competent writing must make use of the conventions of grammar, syntax, word usage, and mechanics. Better writers vary their sentence structures, use more precise vocabulary, and generally demonstrate greater command of language to enhance their readers’ understanding and express nuanced ideas.

Competent writers are also intentional about the style and tone of their writing, aware of how the rhetorical situation shapes readers’ expectations of what is appropriate and effective. Style and tone are used by skilled writers to enhance their purpose and ethos. Persuasive writing, for example, may call upon pathos as well as logos; expository writing may build ethos through a measured, dispassionate tone of voice; and the skillful use of narrative techniques may greatly enhance a recounting of events. Good writers make thoughtful choices about style and tone in light of their writing aims.

The Writing Competencies Model identifies these ideas-centered features of competent writing across the modes of Persuasive/Argumentative, Analytical Expository, and Reflective Narrative writing.

Modes

Writing instruction and assessment has tended toward a “rhetorical” approach since the 1970s, emphasizing the need to provide students with a context and audience for their work.⁵

Three primary modes of writing have emerged from this approach, broadly identified as Argumentative, Expository, and Narrative. These general modes are used in the Common Core State Standards, in the NAEP assessments, in classroom instruction, and in many other places as a way to categorize and differentiate writing skills.

Often these modes are taken as genres, with their own inviolate conventions and boundaries. From this perspective, student writers learn the techniques of the argumentative genre and employ them whenever they are asked to write in the argumentative mode; likewise for exposition and narrative writing.

These modes are best perceived as purposes rather than genres: a writer may make use of any combination of writing skills to achieve a given purpose. Thus, while appeals to reason

⁵ James Britton, Tony Burgess, Nancy Martin, Alex McLeod, and Harold Rosen, *The Development of Writing Abilities (11–18)* (London: Macmillan Education, 1975).

or values are associated with persuasive writing, for example, they should not be confined to that mode. Good expository writing necessarily calls upon the skills of argumentation to make and bolster a case for the value of its explanation. Likewise, argumentative writing can use narrative techniques in making its persuasive appeals, and strong narratives often rely on the expository techniques of description and distinction.

Thus, while the ACT Aspire Writing assessments at each grade level are associated with either Argumentative, Expository, or Narrative modes, these labels are best understood as writing purposes, in the fulfillment of which students may employ any of the writing skills at their disposal. In fact, in ACT's view, becoming a competent writer necessarily entails learning to make wise and effective decisions about which techniques to use in order to achieve a writing purpose. In this sense, then, the identification of an ACT Aspire item as Narrative, Argumentative, or Expository serves primarily to bring into relief a particular purpose for writing, but it does not dictate or circumscribe the approach and techniques the student may bring to the assignment.

Further, ACT Aspire expands the mode labels to reflect the opportunities the assessments afford for demonstrating advanced skills and thinking. The Narrative mode becomes Reflective Narrative in ACT Aspire, signaling that an ability to think critically about the meaning of a recounted event is an essential dimension of narrative writing competence. Similarly, the ACT Aspire Analytical Expository mode reflects the expectation that competent explanation entails analysis in the service of depth of understanding and insight. The Persuasive/Argumentative label recognizes that good rhetorical skills include not just logos but also pathos and ethos.

The Reflective Narrative mode appears at grades 3 and 6. The assessments at grades 4, 7, and early high school are in the Analytical Expository mode. The grade 5 and grade 8 assessments are in the Persuasive/Argumentative mode. The ACT Aspire assessments are designed to give students at every grade level an opportunity to display the higher-order thinking skills needed for meaningful reflection, analytical explanation, and persuasive argument. The means for evaluating students' abilities to display these skills are built into the ACT Aspire rubrics.

Rubrics

The ACT Aspire rubrics embody the principles and philosophy discussed to this point. Each grade level has its own rubric, but there is a great deal of continuity across grades and modes. Each rubric comprises four domains. The first, whether labeled "Reflective Narrative," "Analysis," or "Argument," corresponds to the Generate Ideas competency found in the ACT Writing Competencies Model. In this domain ACT evaluates how acutely the student's ideas address the rhetorical situation and how productive they are of meaningful reflection, explanatory analysis, or persuasive force.

The "Development," "Organization," and "Language" domains correspond to the similarly named competencies in the Writing Competencies Model. The Sustaining Ideas competency, which describes a student's ability to focus ideas on the given assignment and sustain a treatment of them throughout an essay, is folded into each of the four rubric domains. That is, the rubrics do not allow for a separate "Sustaining Ideas" score. Rather, the student's ability to sustain ideas is demonstrated in the ability to focus ideas on the task topic; to develop

those ideas without veering off into digressive or nonessential territory; to organize ideas in a focused, purposeful way; and to use language with precision and control so as to convey meaning with clarity.

At each grade level, and in each domain, a score of 4 is associated with “adequacy,” indicating that a student who achieves this score is on track for success upon entering the next grade level. At grade 6 and above, the rubrics differentiate among six performance levels; this allows for two degrees of differentiation above “adequate.” A score of 5 at these grades indicates an advancing level of skill in identifying and addressing the complexities of the topic; in exploring ideas and using detailed discussions to draw out and support larger observations; in organizing with intention, aware of the effects of the sequencing of ideas; and in using strong, vivid language and effective style. A score of 6 indicates a more advanced ability in each of these areas.

The 5-point rubrics for grades 3 through 5 allow for only one degree of performance above adequate. Finer distinctions above adequate in the lower grades are not evident in the students’ responses. Nevertheless, even third graders can demonstrate higher order thinking skills by reflecting in a meaningful way on their own experiences or those of others. The 5-point ACT Aspire rubric provides a means for recognizing those thinking skills.

The rubrics are analytic in that they delineate four dimensions of writing. However, they are designed for holistic scoring within each domain. That is, the performance level descriptors within each rubric domain are not intended to function as independent features separately assessed; rather, they are interdependent elements that collectively describe what we mean by generating, developing, organizing, or communicating ideas at each performance level, in each grade. Evaluating a student’s performance in the language domain, for example, is not a matter of determining the presence or absence of each specific feature of language found in the rubric description—style and tone, grammar, usage, and mechanics. Rather, it is a matter of using those elements collectively to form a holistic evaluation of the student’s ability to communicate ideas. In this sense, then, ACT evaluates student writing in ACT Aspire via holistic scoring within analytic domains.

Task Templates

The ACT Aspire writing tasks are built from task templates that have been designed to elicit the writing competencies discussed above. Through these templates we strive to generate writing tasks that give students with a wide range of abilities a reasonable opportunity to demonstrate their best writing. Thus, the templates call for writing topics that are accessible in language and concept to a large majority of students at a given grade level, that are free from cultural bias, and that do not require of students any preexisting specialized or background knowledge. At the same time, each template is designed to provide an opportunity for students to think critically if they can, and to demonstrate the upper range of their composition skills.

Improvement Ideas

ACT Aspire includes simple improvement ideas at the reporting category (skill) level on student and parent reports. These improvement ideas are provided for the lowest performing skill for each subject tested. The skills are always ordered from highest performing to lowest performing based on the percentage of points correct. If the percentages for two or more skills are tied, the skill with the lower number of total points is displayed first.

Keep in mind that the order of skills listed on reports may not always be exemplary of where to focus learning. For example, the skills in which a student performed within the ACT Readiness Range may not always be listed first, and the skills in which a student did not perform within the ACT Readiness Range may not always be listed last. Also, keep in mind the total number of points possible in each skill when interpreting the percentage correct.

There are two levels of improvement idea statements (low and high) for ACT Aspire summative reporting. Low statements are given on the report if the student's lowest skill score is below the ACT Readiness Range for that particular skill. High statements are given on the report if the student's lowest skill score is at or above the ACT Readiness Range for that particular skill.

Sample Prompt

This section presents a sample prompt, a written explanation of the task, a task-specific scoring rubric, and improvement ideas. The sample task has been developed to DOK level 3.

Early High School Analytical Expository Writing

It is wise to weigh options carefully before making decisions, but waiting too long to decide can lead to missed opportunities. Write an essay in which you explain both the value and the challenge of carefully considering options before deciding. Be sure to support your analysis with reasons and examples.

Common Core State Standards expect students to write proficiently in the Expository mode (CCRA.W2). The ACT Aspire Early High School Writing test, which is an expository writing exercise, affords students the opportunity to meet this expectation. This writing task expands the expository mode by asking students not just to explain a topic or subject, but to arrive at insight and deeper understanding by way of exploration and analysis. This expectation is grounded in the ACT Writing Competencies Model, which positions critical analysis as an essential dimension of expository writing competence.

The Early High School Writing test marks the third appearance of the expository mode in the ACT Aspire suite of writing assessments. This sample task asks students to explain the benefits and drawbacks of deliberation. While expository tasks at grades 4 and 7 accommodate developing writers by making use, to varying degrees, of scaffolding techniques, this task offers only a sentence of context to stimulate thinking and writing about the topic (“It is wise to weigh options carefully before making decisions, but waiting too long to decide can lead to missed opportunities”). Even in its brevity, this sentence models an analytical approach to the larger subject and works to facilitate critical engagement with the task.

Rubric for Early High School Analytical Expository Writing

	Analysis	Development	Organization	Language Use
<p>Score: 6 Responses at this score point demonstrate effective skill in writing an analytical essay.</p>	<p>The response critically engages with the task, and presents a complex analysis that addresses implications and complications of the subject. There is skillful movement between specific details and generalized ideas.</p>	<p>Ideas are thoroughly explained, with skillful use of supporting reasons and/or detailed examples. The writer's claims and specific support are well integrated.</p>	<p>The response exhibits a skillful organizational strategy. A logical progression of ideas increases the effectiveness of the writer's analysis. Transitions between and within paragraphs strengthen the relationships among ideas.</p>	<p>The response demonstrates the ability to effectively convey meaning with clarity. Word choice is precise. Sentence structures are varied and clear. Voice and tone are appropriate for the analytical purpose and are maintained throughout the response. While a few errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics may be present, they do not impede understanding.</p>
<p>Score: 5 Responses at this score point demonstrate capable skill in writing an analytical essay.</p>	<p>The response engages with the task, and presents a thoughtful analysis that discusses implications and complications of the subject. There is purposeful movement between specific details and generalized ideas.</p>	<p>Ideas are capably explained, with purposeful use of supporting reasons and/or detailed examples. The writer's claims and specific support are sometimes integrated.</p>	<p>The response exhibits a purposeful organizational strategy. A logical sequencing of ideas contributes to the effectiveness of the writer's analysis. Transitions between and within paragraphs consistently clarify the relationships among ideas.</p>	<p>The response demonstrates the ability to capably convey meaning with clarity. Word choice is usually precise. Sentence structures are clear and often varied. Voice and tone are appropriate for the analytical purpose and are maintained throughout most of the response. While errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics may be present, they do not impede understanding.</p>
<p>Score: 4 Responses at this score point demonstrate adequate skill in writing an analytical essay.</p>	<p>The response is appropriate to the task, and presents an analysis that recognizes implications and complications of the subject. There is clear movement between specific details and generalized ideas.</p>	<p>Ideas are adequately explained, with satisfactory use of supporting reasons and/or examples.</p>	<p>The response exhibits a clear but simple organizational structure. Ideas are logically grouped. Transitions between and within paragraphs clarify the relationships among ideas.</p>	<p>The response demonstrates the ability to clearly convey meaning. Word choice is sometimes precise. Sentence structures are occasionally varied and usually clear. Voice and tone are appropriate for the analytical purpose, but may be inconsistently maintained. While errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics are present, they rarely impede understanding.</p>

Rubric for Early High School Analytical Expository Writing *(continued)*

	Analysis	Development	Organization	Language Use
<p>Score: 3 Responses at this score point demonstrate some developing skill in writing an analytical essay.</p>	<p>The response is somewhat appropriate to the task, with an analysis that is oversimplified or imprecise. Implications or complications are only somewhat clear or relevant. Specific details and generalized ideas are somewhat connected.</p>	<p>Explanations of ideas are limited, but include some use of supporting reasons and/or relevant examples.</p>	<p>The response exhibits some evidence of organizational structure. Some ideas are logically grouped. Transitions between and within paragraphs sometimes clarify the relationships among ideas.</p>	<p>The response demonstrates some developing ability to convey meaning. Word choice is general and occasionally imprecise. Sentence structures show little variety and are sometimes unclear. Voice and tone are somewhat appropriate for the analytical purpose but are inconsistently maintained. Distracting errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics are present, and they sometimes impede understanding.</p>
<p>Score: 2 Responses at this score point demonstrate weak or inconsistent skill in writing an analytical essay.</p>	<p>The response demonstrates a rudimentary understanding of the task, with weak or inconsistent skill in presenting an analysis. Implications or complications are not clearly relevant. Any connections between specific details and generalized ideas are unclear or incomplete.</p>	<p>Explanations of ideas are unclear or incomplete, with little use of supporting reasons or examples.</p>	<p>The response exhibits only a little evidence of organizational structure. Logical grouping of ideas is inconsistent or unclear. Transitions between and within paragraphs are often missing, misleading, or poorly formed.</p>	<p>The response demonstrates a weak ability to convey meaning. Word choice is rudimentary and frequently imprecise. Sentence structures are often unclear. Voice and tone may not be appropriate for the analytical purpose. Distracting errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics are present, and they impede understanding.</p>
<p>Score: 1 Responses at this score point demonstrate little or no skill in writing an analytical essay.</p>	<p>The response demonstrates little or no understanding of the task. The response lacks connections between specific details and generalized ideas.</p>	<p>Ideas lack explanation, with virtually no use of supporting reasons or relevant examples.</p>	<p>The response exhibits no evidence of organizational structure. Ideas are not logically grouped. Transitional devices may be present, but they fail to relate ideas.</p>	<p>The response demonstrates little or no ability to convey meaning. Word choice is imprecise and difficult to comprehend. Voice and tone are not appropriate for the analytical purpose. Sentence structures are mostly unclear. Errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics are pervasive and significantly impede understanding.</p>
<p>Score: 0 Unscorable</p>	<p>The response is blank, voided, off-topic, illegible, or not written in English.</p>			

Improvement Idea Statements

Reporting category	Grade	Low statement (scored below ACT Readiness Range)	High statement (scored at or above ACT Readiness Range)
Organization (ORG)	Early High School	Discuss the purpose and importance of the opening paragraph for directing the rest of the essay; practice arranging sentences within a paragraph so that discussion logically builds and progresses; review your writing to recognize when an essay wanders away from its main claim.	Use clustering, concept mapping, or another visual organizer to identify the relationships among the ideas in your essay. Practice arranging the details and examples so the main ideas in the essay logically build and progress. Review your essay to recognize when it wanders away from its main ideas.
Language Use and Conventions (LUC)	Early High School	Read and discuss the works of skilled writers to become more familiar with correct language use; practice proofreading to identify obvious errors and missing words; revise your writing with a focus on clearly communicating your intended meaning while avoiding vague or imprecise word choices.	Read and discuss the works of favorite writers or subjects; use a dictionary to learn any unfamiliar words or phrases; practice proofreading your or others' work to identify obvious errors and missing words; regularly write in a journal to get more practice using both new and familiar words.
Ideas and Analysis (IAA)	Early High School	Try prewriting strategies such as brainstorming and questioning for generating ideas about a topic; rewrite an essay to include additional ideas and perspectives that strengthen the essay's main idea; identify and discuss reasons for selecting one subject for analysis over others.	Understand the assignment: learn to identify the purpose, audience, and key words and ideas in the assignment. Before you begin writing, generate ideas around the topic, asking, What do I know about this topic? How can I use my knowledge and experience to explain and analyze this topic?
Development and Support (DAS)	Early High School	Review model essays to identify and discuss what types of evidence and examples writers use to support their claims; think about which types of support will be most persuasive to different audiences; review your writing to identify areas where you can explain your points with more detail or precision.	Read model essays to identify and discuss how the author uses detailed descriptions and examples to explain a given topic. Practice using detailed descriptions and examples to make your main ideas clearer to the reader. Consider how you might support your ideas with reasons.