ACT Aspire™ Exemplar Test Items

We invite educators, administrators, and policy makers to learn about ACT Aspire by viewing this collection of sample test items and tasks. There is a variety of content illustrated here, scattered across grade bands, and showing different types of test questions and formats.

These Exemplar items are best accessed on a desktop or laptop computer rather than on a tablet iPad or smartphone. The platform in which the ACT Aspire Exemplar Test Items are currently housed does not represent the final platform on which the ACT Aspire assessment will be delivered.

Login Information

To view the ACT Aspire Exemplar Items visit: tn.actaspire.org

Use the appropriate username and password for the subject area you wish to view.

Subject	Username	Password
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Tech Support

For tech support related to the platform experience for this set of ACT Aspire Exemplar Test Items, please contact 888-802-7502 or actaspire_implementation@actaspire.org.

For assistance with the functionality of the embedded TestNav tools please visit Avocet at:

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ACT Aspire™ Writing Assessments

Writing Framework

The ACT Aspire Writing Assessments

The ACT Aspire Writing Assessments consist of 30-minute summative writing tasks for grades 3 through 8, plus early high school. They ask students at each grade level to respond in essay form to a single writing prompt. The assessments are designed to provide a strong indication of whether students have the writing skills they will need in order 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 describe 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 align to Common Core State Standards that pertain to writing and language, as well as Career and College Readiness Standards derived from ACT research.

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 writing 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 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 the ACT *On Course for Success* research project, which examined the curricula of high schools whose students excel despite socioeconomic challenges. We then built the ACT QualityCore End of Course 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 Writing Tests, one at each grade from 9 through 12. The demanding, 45-minute exams measure 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 basis for their design, and reflect the same principles of writing that are found in the ACT Writing Test and in the ACT QualityCore writing assessments.

One key to ensuring this continuity is our Writing Competencies Model.

ACT Writing Competencies Model

Our Writing Competencies Model derives from the ACT Writing Test, the ACT QualityCore English writing assessments, and all of the research, standards, experience, and evidence these tests embody. It serves as the means by which we have extended our philosophy of writing and writing assessment into the ACT Aspire tests.

The model provides a high-level description of the features of writing that we believe are essential to assess in order to support our claims about student readiness. The ACT Aspire tasks and rubrics are derived from the Competencies Model in that 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 similarities to other widely accepted models, including the Six + 1 model (Culham 2003) that has been adopted by the National Writing Project (Swain and LeMahieu 2012). The ACT model also finds many parallels with the 2011 NAEP Writing Framework used by the National Assessment of Education Progress (Persky 2012)[1]—which was also developed by ACT's Writing Test Development group.

Generating Ideas. Regardless of the topic or content of a piece of writing, the writer must think of something to say *about* her subject. That "something" consists of ideas that the writer formulates, in response to a rhetorical situation that prompts her 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 they 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 as much 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 his ideas clear to his reader by explaining and exploring them, discussing their implications, or illustrating them through example. In developing his 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 his development and support of those ideas. Development is the means by which a writer supports his thesis, arrives at insights into his topic, or conveys the meaning and significance of his narrative.

Sustaining Ideas. For a piece of writing to succeed in its purpose, it must keep its ideas in focus. A competent writer is judicious in establishing continuity to the ideas she presents in her essay, and will make productive use of all of them. Her reader will grasp the relationships among the ideas in her essay and will understand her purpose throughout. From beginning to end, her essay will comprise a sustained treatment of relevant ideas.

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 her 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.

[1]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." (Persky 2012, p. 81).

Communicating Ideas. At the minimum, competent writing must make effective 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, reflecting awareness 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 over the last few decades, emphasizing the need to provide students with a context and audience for their work (see Britton et al, 1975). 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.

In our view, however, the modes are best perceived as purposes rather than genres: a writer may make use of any combination of writing approaches to achieve her purpose. Thus, while appeals to reason 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 primarily 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 approaches to writing that are at their disposal. In fact, in our view, becoming a competent writer necessarily entails learning to make wise and effective decisions about which techniques to use in order to achieve a given writing purpose. In this sense, then, the identification of an ACT Aspire Writing task as Narrative, Argumentative, or Expository serves primarily to bring into relief a particular purpose for writing, but 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 effective 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, as is the ACT Writing Test. 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 as one moves across grades and modes. Each comprises four domains. The first, whether labeled “Reflective Narrative,” “Analysis,” or “Argument,” corresponds to the Generate Ideas competency found in the Writing Competencies Model. In this domain we evaluate how acutely the student’s ideas address the rhetorical situation, and how productive they are of meaningful reflection, explanatory analysis, or persuasive force. This domain measures important critical thinking skills and the ability to generate ideas with complexity and insight.

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 her ideas on the given assignment and sustain a treatment of them throughout her 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 her ability to keep her ideas focused on the prompt topic; to develop those ideas without veering off into digressive or non-essential territory; to organize her 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 succeeding as she enters the next grade level. At grades 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 an even more advanced ability in each of these areas.

The 5-point rubrics for grades 3 through 5 indicate only one degree of performance above adequate. Finer distinctions above adequacy in the younger 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 that ability.

The rubrics are analytic in that they delineate four dimensions of writing. However, they are designed for “focused-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 her ideas. In this sense, then, we evaluate 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 carefully designed to elicit the writing competencies discussed above. Through these templates we strive to generate writing prompts 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 are able to, and to demonstrate the upper range of their composition skills.

Answer Key Document

The next page shows the grade level represented by each constructed response item. Correct responses to the constructed response items are not available at this time.

Writing Exemplar Answer Key

Sequence	Grade Band	Item Type	Correct Response
1	Early HS	Constructed Response	Not provided
2	8	Constructed Response	Not provided
3	7	Constructed Response	Not provided
4	6	Constructed Response	Not provided
5	5	Constructed Response	Not provided
6	4	Constructed Response	Not provided
7	3	Constructed Response	Not provided