

Writing Proficiency in the Montana University System

Newsletter 29 May 2009

2009 Scores Show Improvement

In 2009, the percentage of students earning scores of 5.5 and 6 increased to 4.6%, from 3.8% in 2008. The percentage of students scoring at the novice levels of 2 and below declined, from 7.7% in 2008 to 6.5% in 2009. In 2009, 665 more students took the MUSWA than in 2008 (for a total of 7,793) and 129 high schools voluntarily participated in this testing program. The mean score for 2009 was 3.8, compared to 3.6 in 2008.

The scoring rubric defines a score of “4” as proficient, and “3” as nearing proficiency. Essays with scores of 3.5 display enough attributes of “proficiency” to place students into college-level composition at the two-year and four-year campuses of the Montana University System. In 2009, 71% of all students taking the MUSWA (which includes students who plan to go on the MUS as well as those who do not) earned scores of 3.5 or above compared to 65.6% in 2008 and 57% in 2007.

The steady increase in proficient essays (see the bars for a score of “4” below), indicates that students are learning to “state and support a position on the issue defined in the prompt and develop it with some elaboration or relevant explanation; to organize in a generally clear manner; to control sentences, express ideas clearly, and make appropriate word choices; and to demonstrate a basic competency with language (*rubric*).

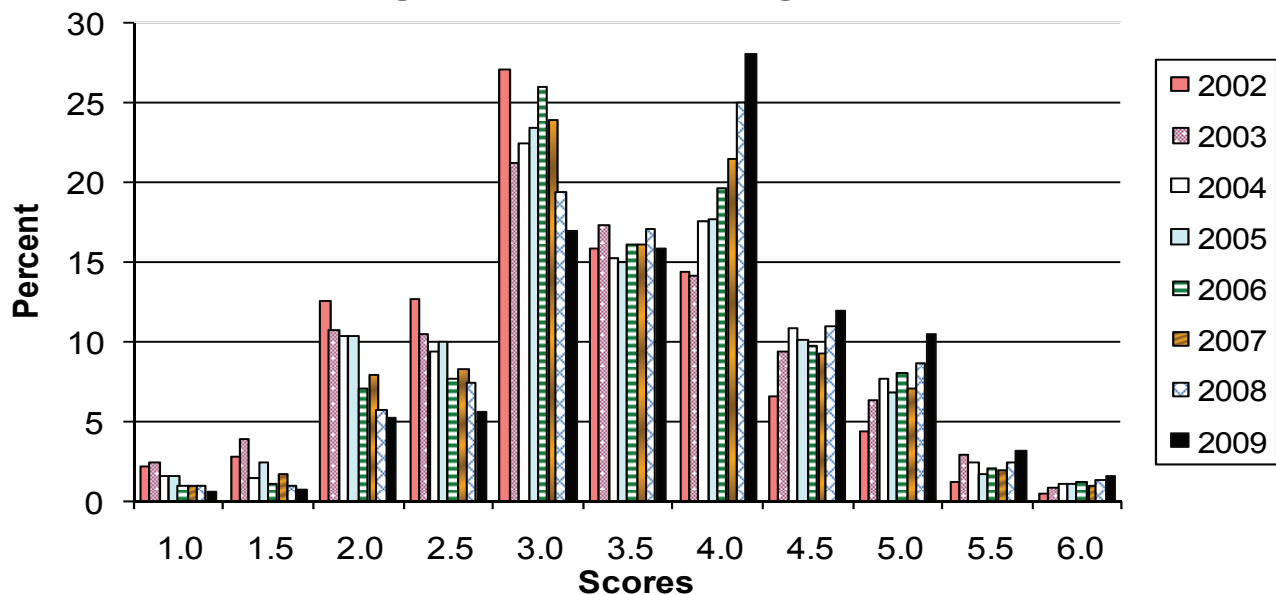
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Distribution of Scores Taken on 40-minute Writing Samples Over Eight Years



The Montana University System Writing Assessment: Cost Effective and Collaborative

The Montana University System Writing Assessment is a cost-effective way to provide students with feedback about how well they will be prepared for college writing and to assist the colleges and universities with placement information. State funds that support the MUSWA include personnel, an operating budget for printing and mailing, travel for workshops, and a contract with Apperson Data Management, which maintains the testing website, reads scantrons, and reports scores. Schools do not pay for these tests or score reports. However, if the 3,400 Montana graduates who enter the Montana University System used

their MUSWA scores instead of taking ACT's Optional Writing Test for admissions and placement, they would collectively save \$49,300.

Because the MUSWA improves teacher quality through intensive professional development, creating learning communities among schools and campuses, the Writing Assessment Workshops are partially funded through Title II: Improving Teacher Quality grants awarded to Universities that host training and scoring sessions. Montana has followed a "training of trainers" model, producing trainers who fulfill lead-

ership roles in the preparation of training materials and mentor hundreds of teachers as they examine student work and discuss instructional practice. Some trainer expenses (such as substitute teachers) are covered through Title II grants.

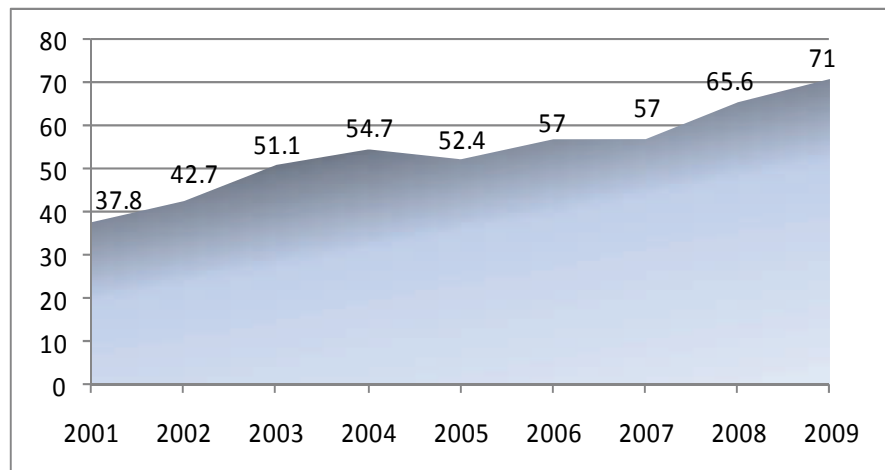
Finally, the participating schools bear the costs of providing substitute teachers for scorers and for travel and lodging costs if needed. Schools are expected to send a scorer for every 40 tests submitted. However, schools, find the professional development and networking with colleagues invaluable.

Source Data for Front Page Graph

Scores	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
1.0	4	2.2	2.4	1.6	1.5	1	1	1	0.6
1.5	5	2.8	3.9	1.4	2.4	1.1	1.7	1	0.7
2.0	16.2	12.5	10.7	10.3	10.3	7.1	8	5.7	5.2
2.5	14.5	12.7	10.5	9.4	10	7.7	8.3	7.5	5.6
3.0	22.4	27.1	21.3	22.5	23.4	26	24	19.4	16.9
3.5	14.2	15.8	17.3	15.2	15	16.1	16.1	17.1	15.9
4.0	11.6	14.4	14.2	17.5	17.7	19.7	21.5	25	28.1
4.5	6.4	6.5	9.4	10.8	10.1	9.8	9.3	11	11.9
5.0	4.1	4.4	6.4	7.7	6.8	8.1	7.1	8.7	10.5
5.5	0.9	1.2	2.9	2.4	1.7	2.1	2	2.5	3.1
6.0	0.6	0.4	0.9	1.1	1.1	1.2	1	1.3	1.5
Number	3365	3467	3465	4714	5458	6910	7270	7114	7753

Percentage of Students Producing Proficient Essays Increasing

Perhaps the most important conclusion from this data is that the percentage of students who can produce essays that are proficient to advanced has increased steadily since 2001, even though the number of students testing has also increased. By 2009, as noted in the graph at the right, 71% of all students taking the MUSWA score 3.5 or above, compared to about 38% in 2001. Of those planning to attend college in Montana, as noted on the next page, 75.2% scored at or above the 3.5 threshold.



Montana University System Writing Assessment Results Frequency Distributions: Spring 2009

Score	Total	11th	12th	MTCol	OSCol	Job	Milit	Home	Other	N/R
1.0	0.6%	0.6%	0.9%	0.3%	0.3%	2.2%	2.1%	0.0%	1.8%	2.4%
1.5	0.7%	0.7%	0.4%	0.3%	0.7%	2.0%	2.1%	0.0%	2.0%	0.0%
2.0	5.2%	5.1%	6.4%	3.5%	3.6%	12.6%	11.0%	17.2%	13.3%	7.1%
2.5	5.6%	5.5%	6.6%	4.5%	4.2%	10.9%	9.5%	10.3%	10.2%	12.9%
3.0	16.9%	16.9%	18.1%	16.2%	13.2%	27.1%	26.7%	13.8%	23.2%	20.0%
3.5	15.9%	15.8%	18.1%	17.3%	13.3%	17.3%	17.5%	24.1%	15.2%	12.9%
4.0	28.1%	28.0%	28.3%	30.6%	27.9%	20.7%	20.2%	24.1%	21.9%	22.4%
4.5	11.9%	12.1%	10.4%	12.6%	14.3%	5.3%	6.1%	0.0%	7.2%	9.4%
5.0	10.5%	10.7%	7.9%	10.9%	14.6%	1.4%	3.7%	3.4%	3.1%	10.6%
5.5	3.1%	3.2%	2.0%	2.6%	5.3%	0.6%	0.6%	3.4%	1.2%	1.2%
6.0	1.5%	1.6%	1.1%	1.2%	2.7%	0.0%	0.3%	3.4%	0.9%	1.2%
Mean	3.8	3.8	3.6	3.8	4.0	3.2	3.2	3.4	3.3	3.5
SD	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9	1.0	1.0	1.1
N	7753	7180	559	4018	2253	358	326	29	684	85

KEY To Student Responses

MTCol: Continue my education at a college or university in Montana.

OSCol: Continue my education at a college or university in another state.

Job: Seek employment after I leave high school.

Milit: Join the military after I leave high school.

Home: Stay at home and take care of my family.

Other: Other.

N/R: No Response

Chart Explained

The chart above contains the following information:

- The first column to the left lists the score points from 1 to 6. Two or three people scored each essay and scores were averaged, resulting in scores such as 3.5.
- The second column (*Total*) lists student score distribution, with a **percentage** at each score point.
- Columns 3-4 list score distributions based on student grade level. Only seniors who scored below 3.0 as juniors were encouraged to take the MUSWA again as seniors.
- The last 5 columns list score distributions for post-secondary plans. NR means no response.
- Below the *Mean* (average scores) row is the standard deviation (SD).
- *N* is the total number and numbers under each category. Data may be missing if students did not bubble-in information about themselves.

The statewide mean for all essays was 3.8; For the 472 handwritten tests, the statewide mean was 3.5. For all word-processed tests the mean was 3.8; for the 5,137 online tests the mean was 3.7; and for the 2,084 word-processed papers submitted in booklets, the mean was 3.9. These score differences may be more correlated with characteristics of the schools that use the different modes rather than the mode itself.

Questions about plans after high school reveal that 81% of these students intend to go to college. Of those planning to continue their educations in Montana, 24.8% scored below the 3.5 threshold for placement into college-level composition.

Forty-seven Trainers Lead Workshops in Eight Locations

Experienced scorers convened in Helena February 18-19 to update the Montana University System Writing Assessment training materials by scoring newly submitted essays and selecting those that best represent each of the score points.

This year, two of the 2008 prompts were “retired” and new prompts are developed and field-tested. MUSWA trainers selected essays written on the new prompts, wrote annotations, and practiced teaching their peers to score accurately. Trainers describe the session as a “treasure hunt,” as each team must find essays from the new prompts that represent assigned score points and then defend their choices to the other trainers. These trainers then organize and lead regional workshops throughout the state.

During a Writing Assessment Workshop, scorers study four sets of six to seven scored “anchor” papers and then score four sets of four to eight “practice” papers, discussing each paper’s strengths and weaknesses and how it should be scored.

Trainer/leaders for the 2009 Writing Assessment Workshop in Billings (March 23-24) included Glenda Skillen Robison of Hysam High School; Kathy Holt of MSU Billings; Kathy Pfaffinger, of Billings Skyview High School; Jon Moore of Shepherd High School; and Laurie Nelson and Molly Joyce of Hardin High School. Professor Kathy Holt coordinated and hosted this session, which attracted 49 participants, filling the Lewis and Clark Room of the SUB to capacity.

The Bozeman Workshop (March 26-27) was coordinated and hosted by MSU Professor Joyce Herbeck. Twenty-eight teachers and college professors attended. Trainer/leaders were Aaron Yost and Jimmy Lewis of Belgrade High School and Laura Brayko of Northstar High school.

The Glasgow Workshop (March 30-31) was organized and hosted by Bob Rennick and Heather Zeller of Glasgow High school, who also served as trainers and helped recruit 25 participants. Other leader/trainers were Katrina Vaira and Shay Witt, Wolf Point High School and Greg Hirst, Poplar High School. Workshop participants in Glasgow were honored by the participation of Regent Janine Pease.

The Great Falls Workshop (April 1-2) was coordinated and hosted by Judy Hay, MSU Great Falls College of Technology. The remodeled Heritage Hall easily accommodated 46 participants. Leader/trainers included Holly Pepprock, Shelby High School; Joyce Damm, Centerville High School; and Jay Pyette and Kevin Shellenberger, Havre High School.

The Helena Workshop was held March 9-10 at the Colonial Inn for 46 participants. Leader/trainers included Jean O’Connor, Helena High School; Steve Vezina, Beaverhead High School; Susan Cotton, Butte High School; and Claudette Morton, Montana Small Schools Alliance.

The Kalispell Workshop, with 40 participants, was organized by Tari Johnson and held at Glacier High School March 16-17. Leader/trainers were Tari Johnson and Melanie Knadler of Glacier High School; Matt Holloway, Whitefish High School; Sandy Chestnut, Columbia Falls High School; Shannon O’Donnell, Carl-Johann Hennell, and Jennifer Turcotte, Flathead High School; and Cheryl Cheek, Lincoln County High School.

The March 24-25 Workshop was held at Miles Community College and attracted 16 participants, despite major blizzards in Eastern Montana. Leader/trainers were Mike MacDonald of Wolf Point High School and Carol Bettenhausen of Baker High School.

The Missoula Workshop was coordinated and hosted by UM Professor Beverly Ann Chin. Among Missoula’s 75 participants were 13 UM and UMCOT faculty members and 20 graduate and undergraduate students. Leader/trainers were Anna Baldwin, Arlee High School; Beverly Ann Chin and Sally Peterson, The University of Montana Missoula; Carla Hinman and Debbie Lowe, Missoula Hellgate High School; Carol Sullivan and Steve Tull, Superior High School; Cathy Corr, UM College of Technology; Rob Plakke, Corvallis High School; and Tim Marchant and Sara Keast, St. Ignatius High School.

Evaluations from the Writing Assessment Workshops were filled with praise for the leadership and skills of these outstanding trainers.

Writing Workshops Provide Professional Development to 322 Participants

The Montana University System Writing Assessment (MUSWA) has grown steadily since its first administration in 2001, when 73 high schools submitted 3,365 essays that were scored by 107 teachers.

In 2004, the Montana Board of Regents adopted these test scores as one standard of readiness for college-level composition. As juniors in high school, students take the MUSWA and find out if they will be ready for credit-bearing, college-level composition or if they are more likely to need a developmental writing course when they enter college. Using this data, teachers and curriculum planners in the participating high schools have been fine-tuning their writing curricula to improve writing performance.

From March 9 through April 2, Writing Assessment Workshops were held at eight different sites throughout the state. Workshop participants, who learned to use a scoring rubric and score essays, earned OPI renewal units or graduate credit. Every student essay is scored by at least two trained readers, using a rubric which describes the characteristics of an essay at each of six score points.

Except for sporadic blizzard conditions throughout Montana during March, the 2009 Writing Assessment Workshops went smoothly, thanks, in part, to the team of Trainers who selected excellent anchor and practice essays that illustrated the range of writing traits demonstrated by student writers at each score point. One essay, in particular, generated much discussion because the writer used the unconventional

organizational style of deductive argumentation. The originality of ideas and unique fluency demonstrated that the student had a strong command of language, though the development was somewhat weak. Such samples stimulate lively discussions and help bring participants back year after year to these workshops.

Evaluations from the 2009 Workshops were very positive and included constructive ideas for continuing improvement. Many participants responded to the question, "What did you find most useful?" with comments such as the following:

- The discussions with other teachers about what makes good writing and how to teach it.
- Brainstorming with colleagues.
- The professional dialogue, seeing varied student papers, learning the expectations of a proficient writer, seeing the teachable moments.
- Professional development, the learning community, collaboration with others.
- Learning to discuss writing in more detail with my students.
- A learning experience for teachers as much as a way for us to contribute our time/skills.

What suggestions were made for improvement?

- Add some yoga exercises.
- Provide more of them.
- Schedule a prompt-writing workshop.
- Give us more time to discuss papers.
- Get teachers from other disciplines. And administrators!
- Don't give us hints about the scores in training.

357 Students Receive Letters of Recognition

Letters of Recognition, signed by Commissioner of Higher Education Sheila Stearns and Board Chair Stephen Barrett The Montana Board of Regents honored the outstanding performance on the MUSWA of 119 students, demonstrated by the highest score of "6" and 238 students with scores of 5.5. These students scored in the top 4.5% of the state's test-takers.

Students are encouraged to include their official Letters of Recognition in college admissions files. The letter includes information to help admissions officers interpret these scores:

- 7,779 students received scores ranging from 0-6 on this test;
- the average score was 3.8;
- each test was scored at least twice by trained teachers and professors;
- inter-rater reliability coefficient has been calculated at .86 for this test;
- students are given a choice of two persuasive prompts;
- students have 40 minutes to hand-write or word process their responses; and
- a score of "6" is described as follows: *These papers clarify a position on the issue defined in the prompt, developed with extensive and compelling evidence. Organization is unified and logical, with effective transitions. Language use is fluent with well-controlled sentences, clear and effective expression of ideas, and precise word choice. While there may be a few errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics, an outstanding command of language is apparent.*

The letters remind students that the Montana University System provides a wide array of quality programs to meet the needs of outstanding students. Students are encouraged to consider applying to one of the MUS campuses.



School Participation in WebWriters Exceeds Record

Webwriters is a practice-essay service funded by the Montana Student Assistance Foundation. The website is hosted at MSU Great Falls College of Technology and since its inception, the webmaster has been Tim Paul, an instructor on the Great Falls campus.

WebWriters employed five experienced webscorers this year, who scored around 314 essays each at a rate of \$3 per essay. All essays are read by two scorers. Trained and experienced scorers are invited to join the webscoring team each fall.

MSU Great Falls noted increased participation for 2008-09, with 28 schools submitting student essays. Last year, 581 essays were scored. This year, 828 essays were submitted, and 768 of those essays arrived at the website with the information necessary to identify the student and the school. Ten of the essays submitted were scored "6," compared to three sixes in 2008.

Schools of Merit Honored

Awards of Merit are reserved for the schools scoring in the top quartile of all schools participating in the MUSWA.

This year, 27 schools had averages of 4.1 or above, compared to 13 schools in 2007. With school averages increasing, the threshold for the top quartile also increased.

To maintain the "quartile" concept, while addressing issues related to school size, the top-scoring schools in each size category were selected to receive Awards of Merit. As a result, 32 schools (25% of the 129 total) achieved Awards of Merit, which can be displayed in trophy cases.

For Class C, Awards of Merit went to thirteen high schools that tested up to 28 students. These schools' averages ranged from 4.1 through 4.4: Moore, Melstone, Twin Bridges, Dutton/Brady, Westby, West Yellowstone, White Sulphur Springs, Valley Christian, Shields Valley, Opheim, Plevna, Augusta, Geraldine, and Sheridan High Schools.

For Class B, Awards of Merit went to seven high schools that tested 29-43 students. These schools' averages ranged from 4.1 through 4.2: Darby, Gardiner, Plentywood, Cascade, Forsyth, Manhattan, and Broadwater County High Schools.

For Class A, Awards of Merit went to six high schools that tested 49-170 students. These schools' averages ranged from 4.0 through 4.2: Park, Bigfork, Florence Carlton, Dawson County, Hamilton, and Belgrade High Schools.

For Class AA, Awards of Merit went to four high schools that tested 180-495 students. These schools' averages were 4.0 through 4.3: Missoula Sentinel, Missoula Hellgate, Missoula Big Sky, Flathead, and Helena Capital High Schools.

Finally, Poplar High School's average score has increased steadily and dramatically since 2004, reaching 4.0 in 2009. Their continuous improvement award celebrates an average gain of .3 points per year.

2010 Testing Window Set and Writing Workshop Dates Proposed

Schools may plan ahead to a **testing window of February 1-26 for the 2010 MUSWA.** Schools should schedule a regular testing date, as well as one day for make-up tests within this window

With state basketball tournaments scheduled for March 11-13, and A, B, and C tournaments March 4-6, those dates are off-limits for workshops. In addition, Spring Break for MSU Bozeman and Great Falls, March 15-19, fall in the middle of the scoring schedule. One possible scoring schedule follows:

- March 8-9 Missoula
- March 9-10 Kalispell
- March 15-16 Billings
- March 16-17 Miles City
- March 18-19 Glasgow
- March 22-23 Great Falls
- March 24-25 Helena
- March 29-30 Bozeman

Another idea would be to schedule around:

- March 22-23 Billings
- March 23-24 Miles City
- March 25-26 Bozeman

Please make suggestions to Jan (jclinard@montana.edu).

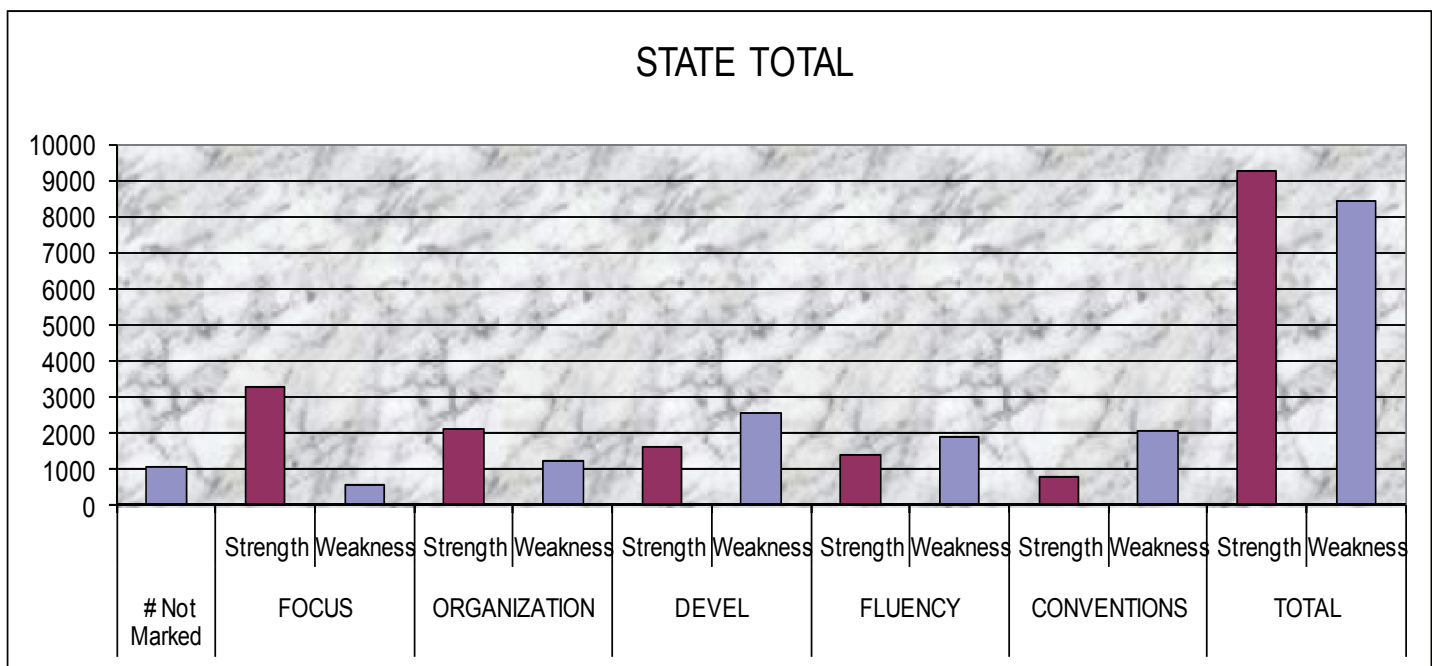
Strength and Weakness Data Helps Inform Instruction

Schools participating in the Montana University System Writing Assessment receive individual reports about the strengths and weaknesses that scorers identified in their students’ essays. Since holistic scoring is the primary objective of this writing assessment, scorers are not required to mark a strength or weakness for every paper scored. Scorers mark strengths or weaknesses that particularly influenced the overall holistic score. Each school’s report shows the percent of papers that had at least one strength or weakness marked. Across the state, this percentage ranged from 50% to 100%, with an average of 86%. When both school size and the percent of papers marked is small, even one paper with a strength or weakness can impact this data. These numbers are graphed individually for each school to help staff see the data and quickly compare their school’s writing traits with the overall state report. Because schools’ profile vary widely, this data shows us that teaching makes a difference in how well students write.

At the state level, the major weakness is development of ideas. Students must learn to more effectively provide support for their arguments in order to be effective, persuasive writers. Most schools had idea development marked more often as a weakness than a strength. However, some schools had “development” marked equally, and in 23 schools (compared to 9 last year), idea development was a strength. Even this trait can be developed!

Secondly, we need to work with students to improve their use of standard written conventions—grammar, usage, and mechanics. In 14 schools, “fluency” was a strength. Based on statewide data, students appear to be doing well with focusing on the topic (clarifying their position) and organizing their essays. Good teaching matters.

Often, middle-range papers are not marked. When a proficient (4) paper is read, the scorer may think, “This is a good, solid paper. Nothing stands out as particularly brilliant here, but problems with language, organization, etc., are so minor that I won’t note them, either.” However, when faced with an essay that scores 3 or below, the scorer thinks, “If only the student had developed this idea better, I could give the essay a higher score. Idea development is a real weakness here. If I could coach this student, I would tell him/her to think of an example or illustration for each of these assertions. Since I’m just not convinced by these arguments, I’ll mark development of ideas as a weakness.”



of Tests Scored
7793

Average Score
3.8

Percentage Marked
86%

Montana University System Holistic Scoring Rubric

- 6 These papers clarify a position on the issue defined in the prompt, developed with extensive and compelling evidence. Organization is unified and logical, with effective transitions. Language use is fluent with well-controlled sentences, clear and effective expression of ideas, and precise word choice. While there may be a few errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics, an outstanding command of language is apparent. (Advanced)
- 5 These papers clarify a position on the issue defined in the prompt, developed with moderate and relevant evidence. Organization is unified and coherent and transitions are used. Sentences are almost always well controlled, expression of ideas is usually clear, and word choice is often precise. While there may be a few errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics, a good command of language is apparent. (Advanced/Proficient)
- 4 These papers state and support a position on the issue defined in the prompt, developed with some elaboration or relevant explanation. Organization is generally clear. Sentences are usually well controlled, expression of ideas is usually clear, and word choice is appropriate for the topic. A competency with language is apparent, even though there may be some errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics. (Proficient)
- 3 These papers state and support a position on the issue defined in the prompt, developed with a little elaboration or explanation. Organization is clear enough to follow without difficulty. Sentences are usually well controlled, expression of ideas is at times awkward or unclear, and word choice may at times be inaccurate or inappropriate. A basic control of language is apparent, even though there may be frequent errors in grammar, usage, or mechanics. (Nearing Proficiency)
- 2 These papers may state a position on the issue defined in the prompt, but development may be minimal or irrelevant. Organization may lack clear movement or focus, making the writer’s ideas difficult to follow. Sentences may often be unclear, expression of ideas may often be awkward or unclear, and word choice may often be inaccurate or inappropriate. Numerous errors in grammar, usage, or mechanics show poor control of language and may at times impede understanding. (Nearing Proficiency/Novice)
- 1 These papers may not state a position on the issue defined in the prompt or develop an idea. Problems with organization and lack of focus may make the paper very difficult to follow. Sentences may seldom convey meaning clearly, expression of ideas may be very unclear and confusing, and word choice may often be inaccurate or inappropriate. Severe problems with grammar, usage, or mechanics show very poor control of language and may significantly impede understanding. (Novice)
- 0 These papers cannot be scored with the rubric. They may address topics unrelated to the test prompts, be illegible, use offensive language, or plagiarize.

What’s on that WEBSITE ?

<http://mus.edu/writingproficiency/>

This website is full of information, such as an archive of all newsletters published since 2000, a *Practical Guide to Writing Proficiency* (with all relevant policies and sample essays) Power Point presentations, and links to several interesting sites that can help with preparing students for college writing.

Students are encouraged to use <http://Webwriters.msugf.edu> as a tutorial on persuasive writing throughout the school year. It is open for essay submission November through April each school year to schools that have registered for the MUSWA.