

Questions and Answers About the California Writing Standards Tests in Grades Four and Seven

In 2001, the California Writing Standards Tests (CSTs in writing) were added to the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) Program in grades four and seven as part of the California English-Language Arts Standards Tests (CSTs in English-language arts). In 2001, the California Department of Education (CDE), the State Board of Education (SBE), and Educational Testing Service (ETS) convened a statewide Writing Test Task Force in Sacramento to review the current status of the CSTs in writing and recommend possible changes. The task force consisted of teachers (kindergarten through grade twelve), administrators, test measurement specialists, university professors, and other educators.

ETS, the testing contractor for the STAR Program, was scheduled to field test new writing prompts in 2005 for the first time in three years. Convening the task force provided an opportunity for representatives from the field and other specialists to recommend possible changes to the writing test that could be incorporated into the field tests. The following are answers to common questions about the outcomes of the task force and subsequent field testing.

Why was the Writing Test Task Force convened?

The task force was convened because the majority of students who took the CSTs in writing during the first five years of its administration received scores of 2, 3, or 4 out of a possible 8 on the writing test. A large number of students who scored proficient or advanced on the overall grade four and grade seven CSTs in English-language arts were among those who received these scores. These results gave rise to two main issues:

First, when writing test scores are confined to such a narrow range, they do not discriminate effectively among student writing abilities. Consequently, these scores contribute relatively little useful information to the results of the grade four and grade seven CSTs in English-language arts. Second, the CDE had received numerous inquiries from parents, teachers, and school and school district administrators about why many of their students who had achieved proficient and advanced on the grade four and grade seven CSTs in English-language arts received scores of 4 or below on the writing tests.

The Writing Test Task Force was convened to review the CSTs in writing and recommend possible changes.

What did the Writing Test Task Force recommend?

The task force made a number of recommendations, including field testing new writing prompts, modifying the scoring process, reviewing the scoring guide, modifying writing test format, and clarifying the directions to students. The full text of the task force recommendations is available in Item #4 of the SBE January 2005 Meeting Agenda. The agenda can be accessed on the CDE Web site at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/ag/ag/yr05/agenda0105.asp>.

How were the new writing prompts developed?

The process for developing the new writing prompts was as follows:

- The prompts initially were written by item writers at item writing workshops and by ETS content experts.
- Proposed prompts were reviewed by ETS content-area experts, CDE content-area experts, and the English-Language Arts Assessment Review Panel. Reviewers approved 20 prompts for field testing in

grade four and 20 prompts for field testing in grade seven.

- ETS pilot tested a number of prompts to determine which of the modifications in format and directions recommended by the Writing Test Task Force were most helpful to students.
- The new writing prompts with modified formats and directions were field tested with thousands of California students.
- Following reviews of field test results by CDE, ETS, and the English-Language Arts Assessment Review Panel, two grade-four and two grade-seven prompts were selected for the spring 2006 administration.

Will all the writing genres that were eligible for testing in previous years continue to be eligible in 2006 and beyond?

Yes. All the writing genres eligible for testing in grades four and seven in previous years will continue to be eligible.

When will the new prompts and formats be available for operational use?

The new prompts will be available beginning with the spring 2006 administration.

How will the writing tasks administered in 2006 be different from those administered in previous years?

Since the writing genres eligible for testing will be the same as in previous years, the new writing tasks will be very similar to those administered previously. The following are the most notable changes:

- A planning page has been added to allow students to plan their responses.
- Students will have fewer pages on which to write their responses to summary writing tasks. This

change was implemented to indicate that summaries are not expected to be as long as the passages they summarize.

- The directions to students have been refined to make them clearer.

Will writing on the planning page be scored?

Writing on the planning page will not be scored. Students are free to use this page or not use it as they wish.

What if students spend so much time planning their essays that they do not finish their scored responses?

The directions on the planning page tell students to spend no more than 15 minutes planning their responses. In addition, after students have had 15 minutes for planning, the test administrator will announce that students should finish any work on the planning page and begin their essays.

If students write their essays on the planning page of the test booklet, will their essays be scored?

No. A brief introduction to the planning page states that writing on that page will not be scored. As in previous years, the directions in the test booklet state that only writing on the lined pages of the test booklet will be scored.

Will the process for scoring the writing test be the same as in past years?

No. In the past, the two readers who read each student response gave the response an identical score approximately 75 percent of the time. The responses received either identical or adjacent scores from the two readers over 99 percent of the time. Ninety-nine percent identical or adjacent scores constitutes such high percentage of interrater agreement that it essentially amounts to a score produced by a single scorer. CDE recommended that to expedite scoring and reduce scoring costs,

each student response be read by only one scorer (with ten percent read by a second reader) without sacrificing scoring reliability. The SBE approved this recommendation at the January 12, 2005, meeting.

Beginning in 2006, one reader rather than two will read each student response and assign a score ranging from one to four. Ten percent of the responses will be read by a second reader to ensure that the scores are accurate and reliable. The score from the second reader will not count toward the student's writing test score. The score the student receives from the one reader will be doubled to produce the student's overall score on the writing test.

If one reader's score will be doubled, will students receive only scores of 2, 4, 6, or 8 on the writing test?

That is correct. In previous years, if the two readers' scores were identical or only one point apart, the two scores were added together to produce the student's writing test score. In 2006, only one reader will read each student response and will give it a score of 1, 2, 3, or 4. This score will be doubled to produce the student's overall score of 2, 4, 6, or 8.

Will the writing tests receive a performance-level result in 2006?

No. As in past years, a student's score on the writing test will be added to the student's multiple-choice score on the grade four or grade seven CST in English-language arts. This combined score then will be placed on a scale, and the scale score will be assigned a performance level for the CST in English-language arts.

Do California teachers score the writing tests?

The readers are college graduates who possess at least a bachelor's degree. Whenever possible, educators are hired as readers. California teachers select the sample student responses used to train the readers.

Is the CDE considering changing the scoring rubrics?

The English-Language Arts Assessment Review Panel reviewed the scoring rubrics and made slight adjustments to ensure that they were making accurate distinctions among score points. These rubrics will be used to score the 2006 CSTs in writing. The scoring rubrics are shown on pages 10 through 13.

Where can I find additional information on the writing test scoring process?

Additional information is available on the CDE Web site at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/sr/scoringprocess.asp>.

Where can I find additional information on the writing test to inform instruction?

Several teacher guides to the CSTs in writing are available on the CDE Web site at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/sr/resources.asp>. These guides contain background information on the writing test, the writing prompts administered in the previous operational administration, the scoring rubric used to score the tests, student responses that illustrate student writing at each score point, and teacher commentaries explaining why the student responses received the scores they did.

Note: The first five pages of sample writing test booklets for grades four and seven are attached to these Qs and As to illustrate how the test format and directions will appear in the 2006 writing test booklets. The narrative genre is used for illustrative purposes only. The planning page and directions for the other genres are essentially the same as for narrative, except for minor modifications in the directions that may be necessitated by differences in genre. The prompts shown in the samples were previously released.

Sample Grade Four Narrative Writing Task*



Grade 4

California Writing Standards Test Writing Prompt and Response Booklet

Narrative Writing Task

Directions:

- In this writing test, you will respond to the writing task on the following pages.
- You will have time to plan your response and write a first draft with edits.
- Only what you write on the lined pages in this booklet will be scored.
- Use only a No. 2 pencil to write your response.

Scoring:

Your writing will be scored on how well you

- include a beginning, a middle, and an end;
- use details; and
- use correct grammar, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization.

* This sample is intended only to illustrate the changes made to the test format and directions to students for the 2006 administration. It is **not** intended to suggest that the writing genre or prompt shown here has been selected for the 2006 CST in writing.

Sample Grade Four Narrative Writing Task

Read the following writing task. You must write a narrative about this topic.

Writing a Narrative

Imagine that you are asked to keep an elephant for a week. Write a story about your unusual experiences with your elephant.*

When you write about this experience, remember

- to include a beginning, a middle, and an end;
- to use details to describe the experience; and
- to use correct grammar, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization.

DO NOT WRITE ON THIS PAGE.

**This page is blank
on purpose.**

— 2 —

* Please note that this prompt was administered in grade four in 2002 and subsequently released.

— 3 — **GO ON ►**

Sample Grade Seven Fictional Narrative Writing Task*



Grade 7

California Writing Standards Test

Writing Prompt and Response Booklet

Fictional Narrative Writing Task

Directions:

- In this writing test, you will respond to the writing task on the following pages.
- You will have time to plan your response and write a first draft with edits.
- Only what you write on the lined pages in this booklet will be scored.
- Use only a No. 2 pencil to write your response.

Scoring:

Your writing will be scored on how well you

- develop a plot with a beginning, a middle, and an end;
- develop a setting and character(s);
- use appropriate strategies: for example, dialogue, suspense, narrative action; and
- use correct grammar, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization.

* This sample is intended only to illustrate the changes made to the test format and directions to students for the 2006 administration. It is **not** intended to suggest that the writing genre or prompt shown here has been selected for the 2006 CST in writing.

Sample Grade Seven Fictional Narrative Writing Task

Read the following writing task. You must write a narrative about this topic.

Writing a Fictional Narrative

Imagine that in the year 2005 the world's technologies suddenly stop working. Write a narrative about a day in the life of a person if this occurred.*

When you write about this experience, remember

- to develop a plot with a beginning, a middle, and an end;
- to develop a setting and character(s);
- to use appropriate strategies: for example, dialogue, suspense, narrative action; and
- to use correct grammar, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization.

Planning Your Narrative

The following page may be used to help you plan your essay before you begin writing. Your work for the planning activity will NOT be scored.

You should not spend more than 10 to 15 minutes planning your narrative.

* Please note that this prompt, previously appeared in the *May 2002 Teacher Guide for the California Writing Standards Tests at Grades 4 and 7*.

DO NOT WRITE ON THIS PAGE.

**This page is blank
on purpose.**

2006 Grade Four Scoring Rubric

4 *The writing—*

- *Clearly* addresses all of the writing task.
- Demonstrates a *clear* understanding of purpose.
- Maintains a *consistent* point of view, focus, and organizational structure, including paragraphing when appropriate.
- Includes a *clearly presented* central idea with *relevant* facts, details, and/or explanations.
- Includes sentence *variety*.
- Contains *few, if any, errors* in the conventions of the English language (grammar, punctuation, capitalization, spelling).
These errors do not interfere with the reader's understanding of the writing.

Narrative writing—

- Provides a thoroughly developed sequence of significant events to relate ideas, observations, and/or memories.
- Includes vivid descriptive language and sensory details that enable the reader to imagine the events or experiences.

Summary writing—

- Summarizes text with clear identification of the main idea(s) and the most significant details, in student's own words.

Response to literature writing—

- Demonstrates a *clear* understanding of the literary work.
- Provides *effective* support for judgments through *specific* references to text and/or prior knowledge.

3 *The writing—*

- Addresses most of the writing task.
- Demonstrates a general understanding of purpose.
- Maintains a mostly consistent point of view, focus, and organizational structure, including paragraphing when appropriate.
- Presents a central idea with mostly relevant facts, details, and/or explanations.
- Includes some sentence variety.
- Contains some errors in the conventions of the English language (grammar, punctuation, capitalization, spelling).
These errors do not interfere with the reader's understanding of the writing.

Narrative writing—

- Provides an adequately developed sequence of significant events to relate ideas, observations, and/or memories.
- Includes some descriptive language and sensory details that enable the reader to imagine the events or experiences.

Summary writing—

- Summarizes text with the main idea(s) and important details, generally in the student's own words.

Response to literature writing—

- Demonstrates an understanding of the literary work.
- Provides some support for judgments through references to text and/or prior knowledge.

2 **The writing—**

- Addresses *some* of the writing task.
- Demonstrates *little* understanding of purpose.
- Maintains an *inconsistent* point of view, focus, and/or organizational structure; may lack appropriate paragraphing.
- *Suggests* a central idea with *limited* facts, details, and/or explanations.
- Includes *little* sentence variety.
- Contains *several errors* in the conventions of the English language (grammar, punctuation, capitalization, spelling). These errors may interfere with the reader's understanding of the writing.

Narrative writing—

- Provides a minimally developed sequence of events to relate ideas, observations, and/or memories.
- Includes limited descriptive language and sensory details that enable the reader to imagine the events or experiences.

Summary writing—

- Summarizes text with some of the main idea(s) and details, minimal use of the student's own words.

Response to literature writing—

- Demonstrates a *limited* understanding of the literary work.
- Provides *weak* support for judgments.

1 **The writing—**

- Addresses *only one part* of the writing task.
- Demonstrates *no* understanding of purpose.
- *Lacks* a clear point of view, focus, and/or organizational structure; may contain inappropriate paragraphing.
- *Lacks* a central idea but may contain *marginally related* facts, details, and/or explanations.
- Includes *no* sentence variety.
- Contains *serious errors* in the conventions of the English language (grammar, punctuation, capitalization, spelling). These errors interfere with the reader's understanding of the writing.

Narrative writing—

- Lacks a sequence of events to relate ideas, observations, and/or memories.
- Lacks descriptive language and sensory details that enable the reader to imagine the events or experiences.

Summary writing—

- Summarizes text with few, if any, main idea(s) and/or details, little or no use of the student's own words.

Response to literature writing—

- Demonstrates little or no understanding of the literary work.
- *Fails* to provide support for judgments.

2006 Grade Seven Scoring Rubric

4 *The writing—*

- Clearly addresses all of the writing task.
- Demonstrates a *clear* understanding of purpose and audience.
- Maintains a *consistent* point of view, focus, and organizational structure, including the *effective* use of transitions.
- Includes a *clearly presented* central idea with *relevant* facts, details, and/or explanations.
- Includes sentence *variety*.
- Contains *few, if any, errors* in the conventions of the English language (grammar, punctuation, capitalization, spelling). These errors do not interfere with the reader's understanding of the writing.

Fictional or autobiographical narrative writing—

- Provides a thoroughly developed plot line, including major and minor characters and a definite setting.
- Includes appropriate strategies (e.g., dialogue; suspense; narrative action.)

Response to literature writing—

- Develops interpretations that demonstrate a *thoughtful*, comprehensive grasp of the text.
- Organizes *accurate and coherent* interpretations around *clear* ideas, premises, or images from the literary work.
- Provides *specific* textual examples and details to support the interpretations.

Persuasive writing—

- Authoritatively defends a clear position with precise and relevant evidence and convincingly addresses the reader's concerns, biases, and expectations.

Summary writing—

- Summarizes text with clear identification of the main idea(s) and most significant details, in student's own words, and clearly reflects underlying meaning.

3 *The writing—*

- Addresses most of the writing task.
- Demonstrates a *general* understanding of purpose and audience.
- Maintains a *mostly consistent* point of view, focus, and organizational structure, including the use of isolated and/or single word transitions.
- Presents a central idea with *mostly relevant* facts, details, and/or explanations.
- Includes some sentence *variety*.
- Contains *some errors* in the conventions of the English language (grammar, punctuation, capitalization, spelling). These errors do not interfere with the reader's understanding of the writing.

Fictional or autobiographical narrative writing—

- Provides an adequately developed plot line, including major and minor characters and a definite setting.
- Includes appropriate strategies (e.g., dialogue; suspense; narrative action.)

Response to literature writing—

- Develops interpretations that demonstrate a comprehensive grasp of the text.
- Organizes accurate and *reasonably* coherent interpretations around *clear* ideas, premises, or images from the literary work.
- Provides textual examples and details to support the interpretations.

Persuasive writing—

- Generally defends a position with relevant evidence and addresses the reader's concerns, biases, and/or expectations.

Summary writing—

- Summarizes text with the main idea(s) and important details, mostly in the student's own words, and generally reflects underlying meaning.

2 **The writing—**

- Addresses *some* of the writing task.
- Demonstrates *little* understanding of purpose and audience.
- Maintains an *inconsistent* point of view, focus, and/or organizational structure, which may include *ineffective or awkward* transitions that do not unify important ideas.
- *Suggests* a central idea with *limited* facts, details, and/or explanations.
- Includes *little* sentence variety.
- Contains *several errors* in the conventions of the English language (grammar, punctuation, capitalization, spelling). These errors may interfere with the reader's understanding of the writing.

Fictional or autobiographical narrative writing—

- Provides a minimally developed plot line, including characters and a setting.
- Attempts to use strategies but with minimal effectiveness (e.g., dialogue; suspense; narrative action.)

Response to literature writing—

- Develops interpretations that demonstrate a *limited* grasp of the text.
- Includes interpretations that *lack* accuracy or coherence as related to ideas, premises, or images from the literary work.
- Provides *few, if any*, textual examples and details to support the interpretations.

Persuasive writing—

- Defends a position with little, if any, evidence and may address the reader's concerns, biases, and expectations.

Summary writing—

- Summarizes text with some of the main idea(s) and details, which may be superficial, minimal use of the student's own words, and minimal reflection of underlying meaning.

1 **The writing—**

- Addresses *only one part* of the writing task.
- Demonstrates *no* understanding of purpose and audience.
- *Lacks* a point of view, focus, organizational structure, and transitions that unify important ideas.
- *Lacks* a central idea but may contain *marginally related* facts, details, and/or explanations.
- Includes *no* sentence variety.
- Contains *serious errors* in the conventions of the English language (grammar, punctuation, capitalization, spelling). These errors interfere with the reader's understanding of the writing.

Fictional or autobiographical narrative writing—

- Lacks a developed plot line.
- Fails to use strategies (e.g., dialogue; suspense; narrative action).

Response to literature writing—

- Demonstrates *little* grasp of the text.
- *Lacks* an interpretation or *may* be a simple retelling of the passage.
- *Lacks* textual examples and details.

Persuasive writing—

- Fails to defend a position with any evidence and fails to address the reader's concerns, biases, and expectations.

Summary writing—

- Summarizes text with few, if any, of the main ideas and/or details, little or no use of the student's own words, little or no reflection of underlying meaning.