

DESCRIPTION OF REGENTS' ESSAY SCORING PROCEDURES

Raters read each essay quickly to gain a general impression of its quality. This approach, holistic rating, contrasts with the analytic grading commonly used in essay evaluation.

The essays are rated on a four-point scale in which "1" is the lowest and "2", "3", and "4" are passing scores. The model essays represent borderline cases; each essay to be rated must, by definition, fall above or below a model. One model essay represents each dividing line.

RATINGS	1	2	3	4
MODELS	2/1	3/2	4/3	

Raters compare the essays they read with the models. They do not rate in terms of their usual grading standards or some abstract standard.

The most important task for a rater is to determine whether an essay is better than the 2/1 model essay. An essay worse than the "2/1" model receives a failing score of "1." An essay better than the "2/1" model but not as good as the "3/2" model receives a grade of "2." An essay better than the "4/3" model receives a grade of "4."

Raters keep in mind that students have one hour to compose an essay on a choice of assigned topics. The essay is not evaluated as a final product that the student might be able to produce after additional time for reflection and revision. The model essays are chosen based on reasonable expectations for writing samples produced in one hour.

The Testing Subcommittee of the University System Academic Committee on English attempts to choose models by using the following definitions of competency, although it realizes that these definitions are by no means exhaustive.

- 4: The "4" essay has a clear central idea that relates directly to the assigned topic. The essay has a clear organizational plan. The major points are developed logically and are supported with concrete, specific evidence or details that arouse the reader's interest. The essay reveals the writer's ability to make careful use of effective transitional devices and to maintain a consistent, appropriate tone. The essay is essentially free from mechanical errors; it contains no serious grammatical errors, and the ideas are expressed freshly and vividly.
- 3: The "3" essay has a clear and central idea that relates directly to the assigned topic. It contains most of the qualities of good writing itemized above. The essay generally differs from a "4" in that while it shows definite competence, it lacks distinction. The examples and details are pertinent, but may not be particularly vivid or sharply observed; the word choice is generally accurate, but seldom--if ever--really felicitous. The writer adopts an appropriate, consistent tone. The essay may contain a few errors in grammar and mechanics.
- 2: The "2" essay meets the basic criteria. It has a central idea related directly to the assigned topic and presented with sufficient clarity that the reader is aware of the writer's purpose. The organization clearly presents some evidence or details to substantiate points. The writer uses ordinary, everyday words accurately and idiomatically and generally avoids both the monotony created by series of choppy, simple sentences and the incoherence caused by long, tangled sentences. Although the essay may contain a few serious grammatical errors and several mechanical errors, they are not of sufficient severity or frequency to obscure the sense of what the writer is saying.
- 1: The "1" essay fails to demonstrate competence. It has any one of the following problems to an extraordinary degree, or it has several to a limited degree: it lacks a central idea; it lacks a clear organizational plan; it does not develop its points or develops them in a repetitious, incoherent, or illogical way; it does not relate directly to the assigned topic; it contains several serious grammatical errors; it contains numerous mechanical errors; ordinary, everyday words are used inaccurately and unidiomatically; it contains a limited vocabulary so that the words chosen frequently do not serve the writer's purpose; syntax is frequently rudimentary or tangled; or the essay is so brief that the rater cannot make an accurate judgment of the writer's ability.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON THE RATING OF REGENTS' TEST ESSAYS

(1) Must an essay have a thesis sentence to pass?

Not necessarily. Although an explicit thesis sentence is perfectly acceptable, and many -- perhaps most -- of our students need one, many a good writer can make the implied thesis clear and can organize the essay well enough so that the reader can follow the line of thought without the writer's having revealed the organizational plan in the introduction.

(2) Must an essay follow a set formula?

No. There are many "formulas" for writing essays, such as the five paragraph and such, but if the writer can explain her main points, and how she arrived at them by examples, then which ever way best fits the writer's style will work.

(3) What should be done with essays that are off the topic?

We face two problems here. One involves the student who has a prepared essay and tries to fit it to the topic; the other involves the student who misreads or misunderstands the topic. When raters find an essay that is completely off the topic, they must fail the essay. Misreading is more problematic. Many students who wrote on the topic "Children should never be disciplined by corporal punishment. Defend or attack the statement" thought that corporal punishment was the same as capital punishment. When a writer misreads the topic this grossly, the essay should fail. Most of the misreadings, however, are not so blatant. Many raters found themselves perplexed by the responses to the following topic: "Discuss the most important moral qualities an elected official should have." Student writing on important qualities of an elected official would talk about charisma, intelligence, and charm. Seldom, if ever, was an essay totally off the topic: a typical thesis sentence read "An elected official should be loyal, intelligent, honest, and easy to get along with." The raters must penalize the essay for this type of misunderstanding, but such an essay should not be failed out of hand. If the essay is well-written and the student does not seem to be deliberately evading the topic, the essay might well deserve one of the passing scores.

The question of whether the writer can both attack and defend an issue when the topic says "attack or defend" has been raised. When the student deals with pro and con arguments but takes a clear stand on one side of the issue, the answer is simply yes. Doing so is not merely acceptable, it is meritorious: "although the 55 mph speed limit costs motorists some time and encourages many citizens to break the law, it should be retained because it saves lives, conserves gas, and reduces the number and severity of accidents" is clearly more sophisticated than "the 55 mph speed limit should be retained because it saves money, lives, and gasoline." the student who simply attacks and defends without coming down on one side or the other does imperil the chances of passing. However, the student who writes a good fence-straddling essay should be passed.

(4) May the student modify the topic?

Students may make reasonable modifications of the topic. For example, given the topic "What courses that you did not take in high school do you now wish you had?" students may state that there are no such courses and explain why. Also, students do not have to discuss specific courses, but may state that they should have taken more courses in an area such as English or history.

Students should not be penalized for narrowing the topic. For example, given a topic which asks for a discussion of the goals of the women's liberation movement, students could narrow the topic by discussing only economic issues.

Students may handle the topic in the first person or the third person, regardless of the person in which the topic is stated. For example, given the topic "Do you agree with the goals of the women's liberation movement?" students may answer, "the goals of the women's liberation movement are valid," and continue in the third person.

(5) How should the rater react to obviously spurious statistics and obviously counterfeit examples?

We must keep in mind that the student writing for the Regents' Test does not have access to an almanac or a set of encyclopedias. Raters should, therefore, be very patient with approximate statistics and with dubious uncles. At the same time, raters must keep in mind that, to the extent examples and statistics are incredible, they are rhetorically ineffective and thus lessen the essay's chances of passing. Writers who say that the accident rate dropped by approximately 10% after the 55 mph speed limit was put into effect strengthen their case; writers who say that the accident rate was cut in half when the 55 mph speed limit was put into effect weaken theirs.

(6) How should we rate an essay of comic or satiric intent?

Reward the successful and penalize the inept.