



**Minnesota Graduation-Required
Assessments for Diploma
(GRAD)**

Test Specifications for Written Composition

August 16, 2010

MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

GRAD Test Specifications for Written Composition

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Table of Contents

THE GRADUATION-REQUIRED ASSESSMENTS FOR DIPLOMA	1
INTRODUCTION	1
PURPOSE OF THE GRADUATION-REQUIRED ASSESSMENTS FOR DIPLOMA	2
PURPOSE OF THE TEST SPECIFICATIONS.....	2
ADMINISTRATION OF THE GRADUATION-REQUIRED ASSESSMENTS FOR DIPLOMA	2
WRITTEN COMPOSITION GRAD.....	3
OVERALL CONSIDERATIONS IN WRITTEN COMPOSITION.....	3
<i>Definition of Terms</i>	3
SCORING THE WRITTEN COMPOSITION	3
<i>Holistic Scoring Features</i>	4
<i>Score Points</i>	4
<i>Domain Review</i>	7
<i>Domain Reviewing Rubric</i>	9
TEST MATERIALS	10
<i>Writing Prompt Folder</i>	10
<i>Answer Document</i>	10
EXAMPLE PROMPTS	10

GRAD
Test Specifications

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GRAD
Test Specifications

THE GRADUATION-REQUIRED ASSESSMENTS FOR DIPLOMA

Introduction

The 1997 legislature enacted Minnesota Statute § 121.113 (1997), Statewide Testing and Reporting System, which established annual testing of all students in grades eight (reading and mathematics) and ten (written composition). This legislation established the Basic Skills Tests, which all students were required to pass in order to graduate from a Minnesota public high school.

The Minnesota legislature later enacted the Omnibus K–12 and Early Childhood Act of 2005 that replaced the Basic Skills Tests given in high school. This statute requires students enrolled in grade 8 before the 2005–2006 school year to pass the Basic Skills Tests. The statute requires that students enrolled in grade 8 in the 2005–2006 school year or later must obtain an achievement level equivalent to or greater than proficient on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments – Series II (MCA-II) in reading and math or pass the Graduation-Required Assessments for Diploma (GRAD) in reading and math. Students enrolled in grade 8 in the 2005–2006 school year or later must pass the GRAD in writing.

In the 2007 legislative session, the statute was revised to include options for retest opportunities as well as students taking other assessments to meet the graduation-testing requirement.

In the 2009 legislative session, the statute changed the mathematics requirements for students in the classes of 2010–2014. Students in these five classes are not required to obtain a proficient score on the Mathematics MCA-II or required to pass the Mathematics GRAD in order to be eligible to graduate from high school. Students must complete all coursework and credits required for graduation, participate in district-prescribed academic remediation in mathematics and participate in at least two retests of the Mathematics GRAD or pass the Mathematics GRAD, whichever comes first.¹

¹ Information contained within this document is reflective of the current GRAD legislation as of the date of this document's publication.

GRAD Test Specifications

Purpose of the Graduation-Required Assessments for Diploma

The GRAD measure the writing, reading and mathematics proficiency of high school students. By requiring high school graduates to reach a specified level on each of these assessments, Minnesota is making sure its students are on track to have the essential skills and knowledge necessary for graduation in the 21st century.

Purpose of the Test Specifications

All tests, from off-the-shelf, norm-referenced tests (NRT) to customized, standards-based tests like those given in Minnesota, have test specifications. The primary purpose of a set of test specifications is to help test developers build a test that stays consistent over time.

Test specifications do not indicate **what** should be taught: the Academic Standards do. Test specifications do not indicate **how** children should be taught: the classroom teacher does. The test specifications presented in this document were developed over the course of many days by Minnesota teachers, many of whom were recommended by various education organizations, school districts, and other stakeholder groups. The substantive parts of this document are true to their hard work. The Department thanks these people for their effort and continued involvement.

The [Minnesota Academic Standards](http://education.state.mn.us) can be obtained from the Department of Education Website (<http://education.state.mn.us>. > Academic Excellence > Academic Standards).

Administration of the Graduation-Required Assessments for Diploma

The first administration of the Written Composition GRAD takes place in the spring of Grade 9. If a student does not obtain an achievement level equivalent to or greater to the passing scale score on the GRAD, then the student is eligible to retake the GRAD. Written Composition GRAD is intended to measure the writing skills a student demonstrates at a given point in time; writing is evaluated in a single, on-demand writing session. A passing score on the Written Composition GRAD is required for a Minnesota high school diploma. It is important that the writing be an example of what the student is able to produce without the assistance of teachers, peers or writing resources.

WRITTEN COMPOSITION GRAD

Overall Considerations in Written Composition

Students may use an expository/informational mode with narrative and persuasive elements to develop this composition. Prior to testing, the prompts of the Written Composition GRAD are evaluated for appropriateness and bias by advisory panels of educational professionals from across the state to ensure no specialized knowledge is required. Students may choose to respond to prompts in many ways and may draw from a variety of personal experiences. Students should make effective choices in the organization of their writing. They should include details to illustrate and elaborate their ideas and use appropriate conventions of the English language.

Definition of Terms

Written composition is a product that demonstrates the ability to formulate and communicate a written message in English to an adult reader.

Writing prompt is a statement of a writing task or topic. Students construct their written compositions in response to a writing prompt. The prompt directs students to write about a specific topic and includes reminders of important elements to consider when constructing their written responses.

Scoring rubric is a set of criteria or scoring rules based on the essential characteristics of composition.

Scoring the Written Composition

Students will respond to one prompt. Two readers will score the composition; a third reader will score the composition in the event of non-adjacent scores (e.g., scores of 2 and 4) or adjacent scores at the passing level from the first two readers (e.g., scores of 2 and 3). The response is scored holistically, giving the paper a score between 0–6. Holistic scoring is the assignment of a single score based on the overall impression of the writing sample. Features considered for holistic scoring of the Written Composition GRAD are as follows.

Written Composition GRAD

Holistic Scoring Features

1. **Clarity of central idea** means the composition has a clearly stated message in direct response to the prompt.
2. **Coherent focus** means the supporting ideas expressed in the composition relate directly to the central idea and there are clear connections among ideas.
3. **Organization** means that the ideas are expressed in an order that is logical and clear: the composition has a clear unifying structure.
4. **Detailed support or elaboration of ideas** means the composition includes information, verbal illustrations, explanations and/or examples, which clarify and expand the central idea for the reader.
5. **Language conventions** are features of language that make written communication acceptable in standard discourse. Their correct use is important to ensure that the meaning of the written composition is not impaired. The writer should apply rules of sentence formation, vocabulary, word order and language mechanics, including punctuation, capitalization and spelling of standard written English.

Score Points

Score Point 6 = Exceptionally Skillful Composition - Passing

The composition:

- is related to the assigned topic.
- remains consistently focused on a central idea.
- is evenly and richly developed with ample, select supporting detail and/or elaboration that clarifies and expands the central idea.
- has a purposefully crafted beginning, middle and end, and an overall sense of wholeness; uses transitional devices, parallel structure or other unifying devices to provide a clear, unified progression of ideas.
- demonstrates a consistent control of language that enhances the overall quality of the response; includes precise and engaging word choice and purposefully varied, rhythmic sentences.
- demonstrates a command of the rule for sentence formation, word usage and mechanics. May contain minor errors, but they do not detract from the overall quality of the composition.

Written Composition GRAD

Score Point 5 = Highly Competent Composition - Passing

The composition:

- is related to the assigned topic.
- remains consistently focused on a central idea.
- is evenly and richly developed with select supporting detail and/or elaboration that clarifies and expands the central idea.
- has an effective beginning, middle and end, and an overall sense of wholeness; may use transitional devices, parallel structure, or other unifying devices to provide a mostly clear, unified progression of ideas.
- demonstrates control of language that enhances the overall quality of the response; includes some specific and engaging word choice, along with some purposefully varied sentences.
- demonstrates knowledge of the rules for sentence formation, word usage and mechanics. May contain occasional errors, but they do not detract from the overall quality of the composition.

Score Point 4 = Competent Composition - Passing

The composition:

- is related to the assigned topic.
- has a central idea that is clearly expressed.
- is well developed with supporting details.
- has a beginning, a middle and an end.
- demonstrates a control of language that enhances the overall quality of the response.
- may have errors in sentence formation, word usage and mechanics, but they do not detract from the overall quality of the composition.

Written Composition GRAD

Score Point 3 = Proficient Composition – Passing

The composition:

- is related to the assigned topic.
- has a central idea that is clearly expressed.
- has some supporting details and sufficient development.
- has a beginning, a middle and an end.
- may present minor obstacles for the reader in moving from idea to idea.
- may have errors in sentence formation, word usage and mechanics, but they do not substantially detract from the overall quality of the composition.

Score Point 2 = Below Proficient Composition - Not Passing

The composition:

- is related to the assigned topic.
- may be somewhat unfocused.
- may lack a beginning, a middle or an end.
- may present obstacles for the reader in moving from idea to idea.
- may contain errors in sentence formation, word usage and mechanics that are frequent enough to substantially detract from the overall quality of the composition.

Score Point 1 = Below Proficient Composition - Not Passing

The composition:

- is related to the assigned topic.
- is very difficult to follow.
- may lack a coherent focus.
- is disorganized.
- may contain errors in sentence formation, word usage and mechanics that are frequent enough to substantially detract from the overall quality of the composition.

Written Composition GRAD

Not Scorable = Responses that cannot be evaluated - Not Passing

The composition:

- is not related to the topic (off topic, OT).
- is not readable because it is wholly illegible or incoherent (unreadable, UR).
- is written largely or entirely in a language other than English (non-English, NE).
- contains an insufficient amount of writing to evaluate (insufficient, IN).
- is non-existent (blank, BL).

A score of 3 or more is considered passing; scores of less than three are considered not passing. Scorable papers that do not pass (scores 1 and 2) will be reviewed using five writing domains. One reader will review the composition.

Domain Review

Domain review is a method for evaluating each feature of a writing sample. The Written Composition GRAD listed will be reviewed in each of the domains only on failing scores in order to be of more assistance in the retest. The domain review will provide feedback on composition, style, sentence formation, usage/grammar and mechanics/spelling. Each domain is evaluated as “developing skills” or “minimal skills.” A paper may show developing skills in some domains and minimal skills in other domains. Below are the features of the Written Composition GRAD domain review:

1. **Composition** -- the focusing, structuring and elaborating that a writer does to construct an effective message for the reader.
 - a. Central idea
 - b. Elaboration
 - c. Organization
2. **Style** -- those features that show the writer purposefully shaping and controlling language to affect readers. This domain focuses on the vividness, specificity and rhythm of the piece and the writer’s presence.
 - a. Specific vocabulary and information
 - b. Sentence variety
 - c. Voice

Written Composition GRAD

3. **Sentence formation** -- the writer's ability to form competent, appropriately mature sentences to express thoughts.
 - a. Correct formation
 - b. Expanding and embedding
 - c. Standard, clear word order
4. **Usage/grammar** -- the writer's control of word level features that make written language acceptable and effective for standard discourse.
 - a. Standard word endings
 - b. Agreement
 - c. Word meaning
5. **Mechanics/spelling** -- the system of symbols and cuing devices a writer uses to help readers construct meaning.
 - a. Capitalization
 - b. Punctuation
 - c. Formatting
 - d. Spelling

Written Composition GRAD

Domain Reviewing Rubric

	Composition	Style	Sentence Formation	Usage/ Grammar	Mechanics/ Spelling
Developing Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A single, clear central idea • Adequate elaboration • Repetition or a momentary lapse in organization, but not disruptive • Closure attempted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meaningful vocabulary and specific information that may be sporadic • Selective information included • Varied sentences • An apparent voice is present 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sentences for the most part complete and appropriately mature • Errors possible but can tell there is not a serious problem with formation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence of a majority of features handled well • A possible weakness in a feature • Potentially several errors , but errors do not demonstrate a serious problem 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some errors in one or more features but not disruptive • Balance in what is done correctly with what is not – majority correct • Consideration of length of the piece
Minimal Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No clear central idea • Multiple topics are approached • A more list-like quality rather than elaboration • A sequence of events without elaboration or closing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Usually basic, vague vocabulary • Usually no sense of audience • Short sentences, creating a choppy reading • Voice is less discernible or absent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some complete sentences along with fragments or run-ons • No evidence of knowledge of sentence elements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meaning effected by the many errors • Difficult reading due to several and varied errors • Lack of consistent use of features 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Errors apparent in most features • Demonstration of little or no awareness of written language rules

Written Composition GRAD

Test Materials

Writing Prompt Folder

Each student receives a writing prompt folder. The folder contains the writing prompt, a checklist of reminders and pre-writing pages. Students can work from their pre-writing pages to create a final draft copy for scoring. Schools discard prompt folders containing pre-writing after testing.

Answer Document

Each student also receives a scannable answer document. Students write their compositions on the three, lined pages of the answer document. Students are not allowed to write compositions of more than three pages in length for this test. Only writing on the answer document is scored.

Example Prompts

If you could live anywhere, where would you like to live? Tell about that place and explain why you chose it. Include details so that the reader will understand your choice. Include details so that the reader will understand your choice.

Think of your favorite place to play when you were younger. Describe this place and explain why it was your favorite. Include details so your reader will understand your choice.

Your teacher has asked you to write about one kind of music you like. Name that kind of music and give specific reasons why you like it. Give enough details so your teacher will understand your ideas.
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Your principal has asked you to write about one change you would like made in your school. Name that change and give specific reasons why you like it. Give enough details so your teacher will understand your ideas.
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