

National Writing Project Offers High-Quality Writing Assessment Services

Despite the central importance of writing in our academic, civic, and professional life outside of school, writing has long been the neglected “R” inside of school (National Commission on Writing, 2003). Current research shows that teachers have little class time to teach narrative, informative, and argumentative writing (Applebee & Langer, 2011, National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). This reality presents a challenge as states, districts, schools, and teachers implement the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts as well as college- and career-ready standards, which establish new rigorous expectations for writing.

A recent research synthesis reveals that high-quality formative writing assessments—those that provide useful feedback to students, teach students to assess their own writing, monitor students’ writing progress, and enable teachers to apply best practices for assessing writing—help raise students’ overall writing achievement (Graham, Harris, & Hebert, 2011).

Over the past 8 years, the National Writing Project created and refined the Analytic Writing Continuum (AWC) Assessment System, originally based on the framework of the Six +1 Trait Writing Model (Bellamy, 2005), for research and instructional purposes. Unlike the holistic scores used in most large-scale writing assessments, which offer limited information about how improvements in student writing may be achieved, the AWC provides accurate assessment of both holistic and important performance attributes of writing.

The AWC is a well-tested system, used at 9 national events to score more than 40,000 student writing samples. The AWC system directly measures writing performance in an objective, unbiased manner. It includes extensively tested and highly refined definitions of the constructs measured, as well as anchors, scoring and training commentaries, as well as training and calibration processes. The system applies a 6-point scale for both holistic and analytic scoring of the following attributes of writing: Content, Structure, Stance, Sentence Fluency, Diction, and Conventions (Swain & LeMahieu, 2012).

THE ANALYTIC WRITING CONTINUUM AT A GLANCE

- ◇ Focuses on core attributes of student writing
- ◇ Provides writing assessment to guide instructional decision-making, professional development, research, and program evaluation:
 - ◇ Offers 6 analytic scores and 1 holistic assessment
 - ◇ Uses 6-point scale sensitive for detecting changes in student writing performance
 - ◇ Allows for use in Grades 3–12
- ◇ Connects local scores to a national writing assessment infrastructure
- ◇ Employs a national network of expert teachers of writing to score student work
- ◇ Exhibits strong technical qualities:
 - ◇ High inter-rater reliability with 90% agreement across attributes, and test-retest reliability
 - ◇ Evidence of validity identified through examination of factor structures, relationship to other writing assessments, studies of classroom, and professional development use

“In my thirty-year career in writing assessment, the NWP’s Analytic Writing Continuum is the only analytic measure of student writing I have found both to be highly reliable and to measure the authentic and central constructs of student writing. The AWC combines carefully constructed categories that provide valid measures with a rigorous and proven training procedure that ensures reliability.”

— LES PERELMAN, Director of Writing Across the Curriculum, Massachusetts Institute of Technology and President, The Consortium for Research and Evaluation of Writing

Inter-rater reliability rates by attribute for 9,129 double-scored papers (22% of total N=40,583) from 2005 to 2011

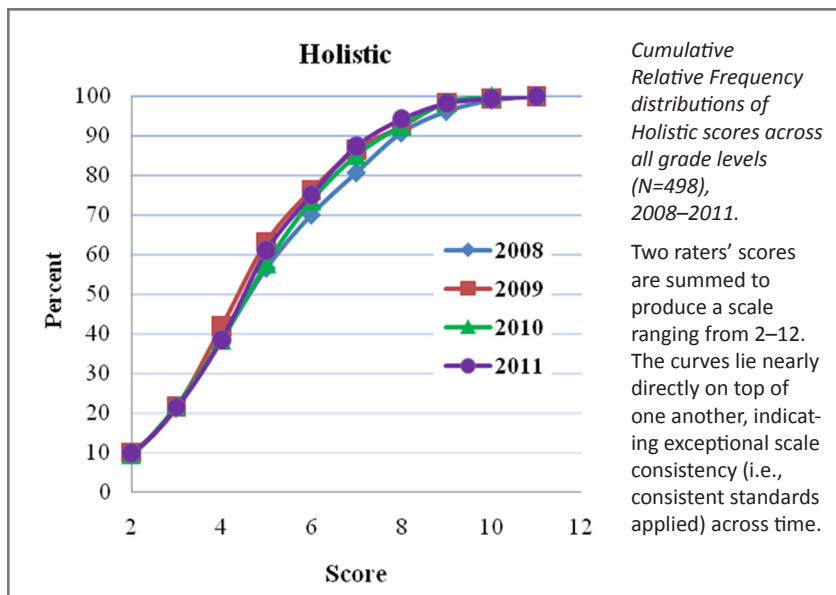
Percent Agreement	Holistic	Content	Structure	Stance	Sentence Fluency	Diction	Conventions
	93	91	91	89	89	91	89

Evidence of Inter-Rater Reliability

At each scoring event, at least 15% of papers are randomly selected to be read by two independent raters. Over the past 8 years, inter-rater reliability rates have ranged from 89 to 93 percent across attributes.

Evidence of Test-Retest Reliability

To monitor the consistency with which standards of the AWC are applied across the years, a total of 500 papers (20–25 at each score point from 1 through 6 at each grade level) have been scored by two independent raters each year from 2008 to 2011. For each attribute, the frequency distributions of scores from multiple years of scoring were plotted on a single coordinate plane (i.e., all resemble the holistic graph below). The graphs show little variation in scores, indicating exceptional consistency in the application of standards across time.



SERVICES OFFERED

Use the AWC Assessment System to

- ◊ Obtain high-quality information about student writing performance, with sensitivity to differences between groups or change over time
- ◊ Enhance grant proposals or add valid, reliable student performance data to research projects
- ◊ Offer scoring opportunities as professional development for teachers

Contract NWP to

- ◊ Ensure technical rigor of scoring involving experienced teachers of writing
- ◊ Host a local scoring event
- ◊ Send papers to be scored at a national event
- ◊ Create and use local assessment systems and materials, all linked to a nationally anchored and validated writing assessment

For more information, contact: research@nwp.org

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Conclusion

Using both holistic and analytic procedures, the AWC Assessment System is a robust instrument that measures important aspects of writing consistently across multiple raters and scoring sessions. It serves as a tool to support teachers' growth as writers and as teachers of writing. More broadly, the AWC provides a common language and metric around which professional development can be structured, encouraging the growth of professional communities, greater teacher knowledge, and improved student learning outcomes.

“After scoring, I know more about how students need to develop. I can assess where they are and where they need to grow. I can figure out what they need to know; every one of them needs something different.”

— LINDA BUCHANAN, Ed.D.,
Resource Teacher, Tupelo, MS, 2009

“My teachers were passionate to use the AWC on a district-wide basis. They felt that the assessment system was far superior to any other they had ever worked with; it has dual potential for summative and formative evaluation.”

— KIMBERLY CUEVAS, 7–12 ELA Program
Coordinator, Washoe County School District,
NV, 2011

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