INSTRUCTIONS FOR SCORING REGENTS’ TESTING PROGRAM ESSAYS

DESCRIPTION OF ESSAY SCORING PROCEDURE

Raters should 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 three-point scale in which “1” is a failing score and “2” and “3” 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.

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Raters should compare the essays they read with the models. They should 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 “3/2” model receives a grade of “3.”

Raters should keep in mind that students have one hour to compose an essay on a choice of assigned topics. The essay should not be 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.

3: The “3” essay shows distinction. It meets all and exceeds most of the criteria for a “2.” The ideas are expressed freshly and vividly, and the essay arouses the reader’s interest to a greater extent that the typical “2” essay.

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 is clear enough for the reader to perceive the writer’s plan. The paragraphs coherently present some evidence or details to substantiate the 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.
TOPIC: WHY WOULD YOU LIKE OR DISLIKE OWNING YOUR OWN BUSINESS?

Going out of Business Sale! Signs of this nature can be seen everywhere. Today opening up a business can be scary, because of the extensive risk, high cost, and extreme stress.

The chief reason I would not want to start my own business is the great risk of failure. Today statistics show that four out of every six businesses fail within the first year. Those are not very good odds for one just starting his or her own business.

The second reason not to start my own business is the high cost of starting a business. Businesses take a great deal of money to get started, and for that matter to keep running. The first thing one has to do is find a place to put the business. Lots are very expensive. Then a building has to be built, and merchandise to fill the building has to be purchased.

Finally owning a business can be stressful. Being ones own boss can be stressful to her or him by the way of having to make all of the important decisions, or can cause stress at home. The stress at home can be very detrimental to the marriage, or even the family as a whole.

Concluding this owning a business is just one big headache. On the other hand some people are very successful, and they got that way by taking the risk of owning their own business. I personally don’t think that owning a business is worth the risk, when working for someone else is a lot safer.
TOPIC: WHAT ANIMAL DO YOU LIKE (OR DISLIKE) THE MOST? WHY?

In my family there are numerous animal lovers, including me. Though I love all of God's creatures, I must say that I am lacking in emotions for cats. It is not that I hate the creatures. I have had bad experiences with them in the past.

The first feline that I owned was a pure-bred Persian. A beautiful cat to say the least, but its beauty was deceiving. It constantly shed its fur all over the house. No where could I run to find a haven from my newly discovered allergies.

The second feline that I owned was a tabby. This cat was a fun animal to own. It was constantly playing and batting things around. All was well until it matured. When it got its claws in, my furniture became the clawing areas and when it went forth into the surrounding neighborhood it would bring back to me a rabbit, squirrel, bird, etc. that it would politely leave on the porch. I suppose that it was a gift, but I could not make the cat understand that I did not want it.

Now that I had owned two cats, I was not happy when my best friend got me another for my birthday. I immediately began trying to get rid of it, but nobody wanted it. I was reluctant to take it to a shelter because it might end up being put to sleep. I wanted to know that it would have a home, but not mine.

As my luck goes with cats, it would meow in the most horrific scream every night. After two nights of this torture I took it to my best-friend's house and left it with her parents. I told them to give it to her as a gift. She kept it and still has it. I am glad that she kept it and did not take it back to where she got it.

As for me, I prefer to own dogs, fish, parrots, and my horse Trigger. Why? Because none of these animals has ever destroyed my furniture, made me sick, brought dead animals to my house, or kept me up all night for no reason. My dogs are excellent guards. My horse Trigger is an old friend that I have grown up with. My fish are silent, beautiful creatures of the deep and my parrot is a most intelligent bird. They all keep me company, and they all make me happy.
ANALYSES OF MODEL ESSAYS

Analysis of 2/1 Model

The essay is not a clear “2” because only the third paragraph is adequately developed; the next-to-the-last sentence of the essay violates the unity and coherence of the paragraph in which it appears; several phrases are unidiomatic; some words and phrases are repeated excessively; the second sentence of the fourth paragraph contains a jarring shift in construction; throughout the essay the point of view vacillates between the first person and the third; and in the first sentence of the last paragraph, “concluding this,” a dangling modifier, is particularly confusing because “this” lacks a referent and the phrase is not set off with a comma.

The essay is not a clear “1” because it has a central idea that directly answers the question raised by the topic and that is developed through a clear organizational plan; the transitions are clear, although blatant and conventional; the third paragraph is reasonably coherent, logical, and free from repetition; the essay contains only a few serious grammatical errors, no spelling errors, and no errors in diction that block communication; the syntax is neither consistently rudimentary nor hopelessly tangled; and the essay has an interest-catchign opening.

Analysis of 3/2 Model

The essay demonstrates more than the “competence” of a “2” essay, but fails to attain the “definite competence” of a “3.” The organization is clear but not formulaic. The essay arouses interest and the diction is distinctive. That the diction is inconsistent (overuse of “it” in the fourth paragraph, for example) makes the essay not a clear “3.”
QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON THE RATING OF REGENTS’ TEST ESSAYS

(1) Why do we have 2/1 and 3/2 models? Why don’t we have models of “1,” “2,” and “3” essays?

The discrete ratings cover a wide range of writing performance, particularly the “1.” An essay may be assigned a “1” for a variety of reasons. For example, a “1” essay may be off the topic, contain grammatical errors that frustrate the writer’s attempt to communicate, totally lacking in structure, or short and unclear. There are very, very low “1’s,” and there are “1’s” that are almost passing. While “2” and “3” do not cover so wide a range, it would still be impossible simply to pick one model and say, “This is it.” The example would, of necessity, be a low “2,” a middling “2,” or a high “2.” The 3/2 and 2/1 models are intended to represent a borderline.

(2) What specifically does the 2/1 model represent?

The essay chosen as a 2/1 model represents the balance point between the “1” and the “2” essay. The committee which selected the essay would hope that, if the 2/1 model essay were rated by fifty raters, it would receive twenty-five “1’s” and twenty-five “2’s.” A tiny nudge could swing the balance either way. It would be a clear “2,” if, for example: a few more supporting details were supplied, the diction were more appropriate, the mechanical and grammatical errors were fewer, or the coherence were improved. On the other hand, it would be a clear “1” if it were a trifle weaker in any one of these aspects.

(3) 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 introductory paragraph.

(4) Must the essay follow a set formula?

No.

(5) 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. An essay may be penalized for misunderstandings, but the 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 definitely yes. Doing so is not merely acceptable, it is meritorious: “although the 55 mph speed limit costs motorists some time and encouraged many citizens to break the law, it should be reinstated because it saved lives, conserved gas, and reduced the number and severity of accidents” is clearly more sophisticated than “the 55 mph speed limit should be reinstated because it saved 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.

(6) 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 taken?” 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 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 movement?” students may answer, “The goals of the women’s movement are valid,” and continue in the third person.

(7) 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.

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

Neither of these are reasons for failing an essay. Compare an essay with such intent to the model essays.