

State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR®)

Deconstructing the Writing Rubric

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The Big Picture

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The same three overarching aspects of writing are addressed in each rubric:

- ❑ Organization/Progression**
- ❑ Development of Ideas**
- ❑ Use of Language/Conventions**

There are 8 bullets altogether. Important to understand the rubric on two levels:

- ❑ what each bullet means in terms of writing skills**
- ❑ how the bullets—the writing skills—are interrelated**

Deconstructing the Writing Rubric

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Three bullets: Organization/Progression

Bullet #1: Responsiveness

Bullet #2: Focus/Sustaining Focus

Bullet #3: Progression/Connections

Deconstructing the Writing Rubric

Organization/Progression

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Bullet #1—RESPONSIVENESS to the purpose and the specific demands of the prompt

- ❑ **The organizing structure of the response must “fit” the purpose for writing.**
- ❑ **The content of the response must be focused on the central “charge” of the prompt (the “Write about”).**

Deconstructing the Writing Rubric

Organization/Progression

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Responsiveness in Personal Narrative

- ❑ Personal narratives must have some type of story line and move through time (even if that story line captures only a small piece of time).
- ❑ The student must use organizational strategies and literary devices appropriate to narrative writing (e.g., description, dialogue).
- ❑ The experience the student writes about must really “fit” the prompt.
- ❑ Personal narratives must be realistic with regard to the scenario established and the student’s age (age 9 or 10 for 4th graders and age 12 or 13 for 7th graders).

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Organization/Progression

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Responsiveness in Expository and Persuasive Writing

- ❑ Expository essays must explain what the student thinks about the topic. The student is free to explore the ambiguities of the issue.
- ❑ Persuasive essays must convince the reader to accept the student's viewpoint or to take a particular action.
- ❑ The essay must be a direct response to the central "charge" of the prompt (the "Write about"), not the stimulus (the "Read") or the "Think about."
- ❑ The student must use organizational strategies appropriate to informational writing (e.g., cause/effect, compare/contrast, problem/solution).

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Organization/Progression

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Bullet #2—FOCUS

- ❑ What the student wants to accomplish—in essence, the “center” of the writing (the story line, main point, central/controlling idea, thesis)
- ❑ A general rule of thumb on STAAR: the more narrow the focus, the better, since what a student writes has to be manageable in one page (26 lines).

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Organization/Progression

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Bullet #2—SUSTAINING FOCUS

- How well all details/ideas (in effect, all sentences) contribute to meaning and enhance understanding**
- Purpose: to create a unified and coherent piece**

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Organization/Progression

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Bullet #2—SUSTAINING FOCUS

- ❑ **Unity depends on how well the student conceives the piece every step of the way and as a whole: does each detail/idea relate to, develop, and clarify the story line, main point, or argument? Does it all fit together?**
- ❑ **Coherence depends on how seamlessly each sentence and idea flows into the next.**

Unity = the “what”

Coherence = the “how”

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Organization/Progression

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Focus in Personal Narrative

- ❑ Personal narrative must be focused on a single real experience—with all details and events related to that experience.
- ❑ What often weakens focus:
 - Inclusion of details or events that are not actually part of the central story line
 - The use of a “bed-to-bed” narrative strategy
 - Inclusion of multiple story lines that are related to the prompt but not to each other
 - Use of unnecessary adjectives and adverbs

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Organization/Progression

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Focus in Expository Writing

- ❑ To be focused, an expository essay must be centered around an explicit, specific controlling idea, which represents the student's "take" on the topic.
- ❑ The controlling idea must be a direct statement of what the student will explain and must give the reader a clear idea of the goal of the essay.

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Organization/Progression

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Focus in Persuasive Writing

- ❑ To be focused, a persuasive essay must be centered around a clear position statement, which represents the student's viewpoint on the issue and forms the basis of the argument.
- ❑ The position statement must be a direct assertion of what the student will argue in the essay and must “drive” the way in which the student builds the argument.

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Organization/Progression

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What Weakens Focus in Expository and Persuasive Writing

- ❑ A controlling idea or position statement that is too broad or general → contributes to “all-over-the-place” development, while a clear and focused central/controlling idea helps the student “rein in” development.
- ❑ A controlling idea or position statement that is evolving → makes it difficult to judge which ideas or reasons are extraneous or irrelevant to the explanation or argument and which are adding substance.

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Organization/Progression

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What Weakens Focus in Expository and Persuasive Writing

- ❑ The narrative framing devices that students sometimes use to get “in” and “out” of the essay have a negative impact on focus (and development) because they don’t contribute anything to the explanation or argument and take up valuable space (sometimes 1/3 of the paper).

A problem more at grades 4 and 7 than high school

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Organization/Progression

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Bullet #3—PROGRESSION/CONNECTIONS

- ❑ What isn't required: a specific number of ideas or paragraphs
- ❑ What is required: moving logically from sentence to sentence and connecting ideas.
 - Each sentence connects to the next sentence—no sentences overlap.
 - Meaningful transitions clarify relationships—between sentences, paragraphs, and ideas.



The reader can really (easily) follow the student's train of thought because the story line, explanation, or argument is well controlled.

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Organization/Progression

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What Weakens Progression/Connections in Expository and Persuasive Writing

- ❑ The student moves randomly or meanders from sentence to sentence.
- ❑ The student repeats the prompt in the introduction or repeats the introduction in the conclusion.
- ❑ The student repeats the same sentence or paragraph in the body of the paper, sometimes paraphrased but sometimes almost word for word.

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Organization/Progression

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What Weakens Progression/Connections in Expository and Persuasive Writing

- ❑ There are no transitions or only perfunctory transitions (e.g., The first thing that happened, The next thing that happened; First, Second, Third; My first reason, My final reason).



Problems with progression and connections can cause disruptions in the flow of the story line, explanation, or argument; can make the writing “jumpy”; and can make the relationships among ideas unclear or weak.

Deconstructing the Writing Rubric

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Two bullets: Development

Bullet #4: Quality of the Development

Bullet #5: Thoughtfulness/Individuality

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Development of Ideas

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Bullet #4—QUALITY of the development

- ❑ Prompts focus on topics that DO NOT require students to bring particular background knowledge or facts to the table.**
- ❑ The best development is real, based on a student's own experiences and thinking about the world. Why? Because this allows the student to base the writing on what he or she TRULY knows and understands.**
- ❑ For young and inexperienced writers, the “closer” and more first-hand the development is, the more effective it tends to be.**

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Development of Ideas

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Bullet #4—QUALITY of the development

- ❑ The quality of the development is more important than the quantity of the development.**
- ❑ Development can't happen without good progression, and good progression requires meaningful transitions. Students have to thread sentences together (each sentence to the next) in order to build meaning. The goal: each idea is enriched/enhanced by what came before it.**

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Development of Ideas

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Bullet #4—QUALITY of the development

- ❑ The biggest problem we see when meaningful transitions are lacking: clusters of ideas that are each linked to the prompt but not connected to each other.



a roadblock to substance/depth/thoughtfulness
because the student does not “build” from one idea
to the next

Remember

- ❑ Unconnected ideas = superficial development
- ❑ Superficial development = basic writing (not satisfactory or accomplished writing)

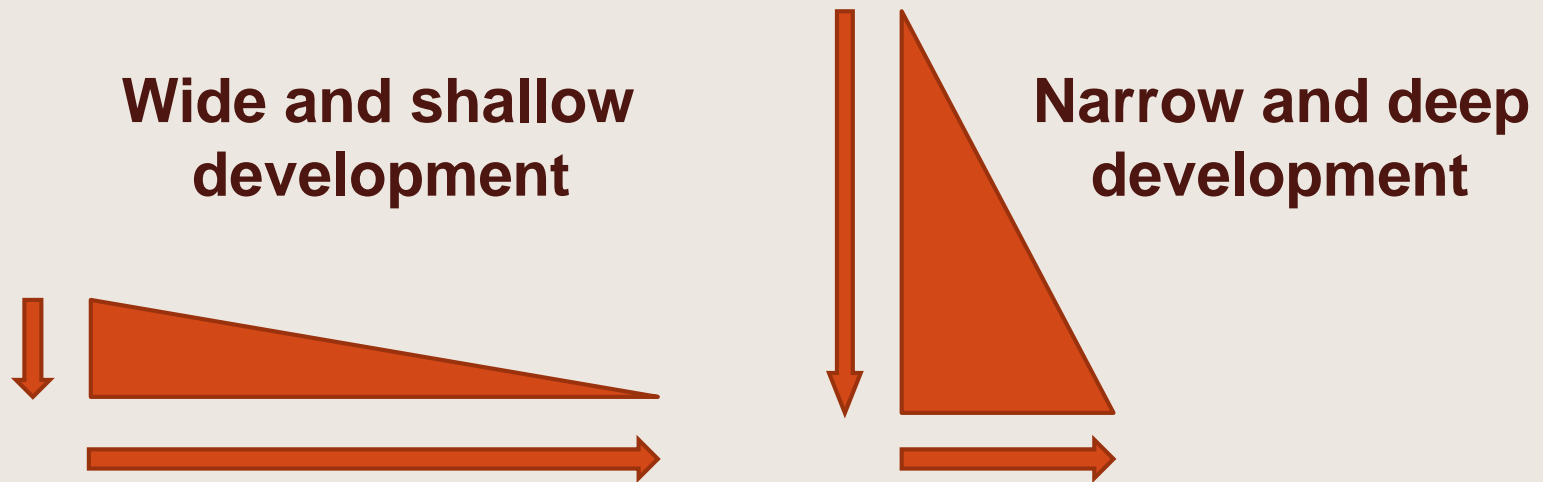
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Development of Ideas

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Bullet #4—QUALITY of the development

- ❑ **Narrow and deep development—fewer ideas with more specificity and depth—is better than more ideas with less specificity and depth (especially in 26 lines).**



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Development of Ideas

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Bullet #5—THOUGHTFULNESS/INDIVIDUALITY of the development

- ❑ The student’s “presence” in the writing itself (in effect, the face behind the writing): his personal feelings and thinking about the task (purpose + topic)—all expressed through what the student chooses to develop and how.**
- ❑ The more original and individualistic the writing, the more engaging. Why? Because the reader is able to “see” the student and understand something about who he is and what he thinks.**

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Development of Ideas

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Bullet #5—What impedes thoughtfulness and individuality

- ❑ Formulaic approaches (e.g., 5-paragraph essays)—almost always result in a lack of thoughtfulness, individuality, and depth (because students are using a “fill-in-the-box” strategy)**
- ❑ The inclusion of ideas that are too complicated, abstract, philosophical, or overly erudite for a student’s writing skills**

Deconstructing the Writing Rubric

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Three bullets: Use of Language/Conventions

Bullet #6: Word Choice

Bullet #7: Sentence Control

**Bullet #8: Sentence Boundaries and
Conventions**

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Use of Language/Conventions

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Bullet #6—WORD CHOICE

- ❑ The words students use must “fit” the purpose (which includes establishing an appropriate tone).
- ❑ The most effective word choice always makes the writing clearer, more precise, and more interesting.

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Use of Language/Conventions

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Bullet #6—WORD CHOICE

- ❑ Students' language use can be relatively informal, especially at 4th and 7th grade, though students should not use slang.
- ❑ Pronoun use—Narratives should be written in 1st person since students are writing about their own personal experiences. For expository or persuasive writing, 1st or 3rd person (or even 2nd person) can work as long as students are developing an explanation or argument.

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Use of Language/Conventions

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Problems with word choice vary.

- ❑ Many students have a limited vocabulary, especially when it comes to writing—causing them to use words that are vague, general, or imprecise.**
- ❑ Other students have a more developed vocabulary but sometimes attempt to use language that sounds “impressive” but that does not fit the context of the sentence or the tone needed.**
- ❑ Sometimes students use words correctly in terms of their denotation but not their connotation.**

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Use of Language/Conventions

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Bullet #7—SENTENCE CONTROL

- ❑ Sentences are the primary vehicle (the framework) students use to communicate their ideas—that’s why sentences have such a great effect on the quality and clarity of a narrative or essay.**
- ❑ What isn’t required: a particular combination of sentence structures and lengths.**
- ❑ What is required: sentences that are logical, meaningful, and controlled, making the flow of details or ideas easy to follow and understand.**

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Use of Language/Conventions

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Problems with sentence control vary.

- ❑ Some students can construct only short or simplistic sentences. When strung together, these sentences can cause the writing to be choppy and the ideas to be disconnected.**
- ❑ Some students write sentences that are awkward or unclear because of particular grammatical problems—e.g., dangling or misplaced modifiers, faulty parallelism, shifting subjects (especially with pronouns), or incomplete constructions.**
- ❑ In almost all cases, problems at the sentence level are a control issue.**

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Use of Language/Conventions

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Bullet #8—SENTENCE BOUNDARIES

- Sentence boundaries = the correctness of sentences: specifically, we're looking for whether the student is able to write complete sentences (i.e., place correct divisions between one sentence and another).**
- Students who have problems with sentence boundaries write fragments and run-ons (sentences “fused” together with no punctuation or sentences joined with a comma only, called a comma splice).**

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Use of Language/Conventions

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Bullet #8—CONVENTIONS

- ❑ **Conventions = the correctness of spelling, capitalization, punctuation, grammar, and usage: specifically, we're looking for the degree to which students can apply the rules of written language to their own writing.**
- ❑ **Demonstrating consistent control of conventions does not equal “error-free” writing. It does mean that students have an overall command of conventions, even if some errors are evident.**
- ❑ **Because 4th and 7th graders are young and relatively inexperienced writers, we expect them to have mastered age-appropriate conventions rules, not necessarily all conventions rules.**

Deconstructing the Writing Rubric

Use of Language/Conventions

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Bullet #8—CONVENTIONS

- ❑ The strength of the conventions is a holistic judgment, not one based on “counting” the number of errors. Why? Because some errors are more serious than others, and some result from the student’s attempt to do something linguistically sophisticated for his or her age.
- ❑ The more consistently a student is able to apply conventions rules, the more fluent and effective the writing tends to be.

Remember

Control at the word and sentence level is necessary for effectiveness at the paragraph and essay level.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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