

8	An "8 paper" is clear and includes meaningful details and clarifying elaboration/examples . Strong topic sentences and a strong closing passage . Sentence structure is good including style and effectiveness . Word choice is almost always accurate and demonstrates an advanced vocabulary . Paper flows nicely, addresses thoughts logically and succinctly, and writer's voice is clear . Any proofreading mistakes and some errors in standard written English (such as in sentence structure, verb and pronoun use, punctuation, spelling, and capitalization), are minimal and do not hamper communication.
7	A "7 paper" offers a clear, meaningful approach to the assigned topic and includes meaningful details and fairly helpful elaboration/examples . Clear organization is apparent through paragraphs and transition signals. Sentence structure is good and coherent including style and effectiveness . Word choice is almost always accurate and demonstrates a strong vocabulary . Paper flows nicely, addresses thoughts logically and succinctly, and writer's voice is clear . Any proofreading mistakes and some errors in standard written English (such as in sentence structure, verb and pronoun use, punctuation, spelling, and capitalization), are minimal and do not hamper communication.
6	A "6 paper" offers a clear, meaningful writing to the assigned topic and includes meaningful details . Clear organization is apparent through paragraphs and transition signals. Sentence structure is overall fluent and coherent. Word choice is mostly accurate and demonstrates an appropriate vocabulary . There may be some proofreading mistakes and occasional errors in standard written English, but these do not significantly hamper communication.
5	A "5 paper" offers clear writing for the assigned topic and includes details of varying quality . Organization is apparent through paragraphs and transition signals. Sentence structure is fairly fluent and coherent. Word choice is mostly accurate. There may be some proofreading mistakes and occasional errors in standard written English, but these do not significantly hamper communication.
4	A "4 paper" offers a somewhat clear writing on the assigned topic and moderately includes details. Organization is mostly apparent through paragraphs and some transition signals. Sentence structure is fairly fluent and coherent. Word choice is sometimes vague. There are likely to be proofreading mistakes and occasional errors in standard written English, but these, while noticeable, do not significantly hamper communication.
3	A "3 paper" offers an approach to the topic, but support may be inadequate or weakly organized . Sentence structure may have lapses from coherence and fluency . Word choice is sometimes vague . There are likely to be proofreading mistakes and some errors in standard written English, but these, while noticeable, do not significantly hamper communication.
2	A "2 paper" may lack a clear approach to the topic, or it may offer inadequate or disorganized support . Sentence structure may be often confused or immature . Word choice is often vague or inaccurate . There are frequent proofreading mistakes and frequent errors in standard written English that may interfere with communication.
1	A "1 paper" may appear to lack an understanding of the topic or may fail to approach the topic with relevant support. Sentence structure may be often confused or immature . Word choice is often vague or inaccurate . There are frequent proofreading mistakes and frequent errors in standard written English that are likely to interfere with communication.

Clear and includes meaningful details and clarifying elaboration/examples.

These criteria focus on considerations for the audience of the writing. At the higher levels on the rubric (8, 7, 6), writers set a clear and meaningful approach to the topic. Many times this is the topic sentence of the first paragraph. In it the writer directly addresses the issue he will be writing about. This introduction, or thesis statement, should be succinct and should pique the reader's interest. If the statement is well-written you know the author's stance and the approach that he will take with the topic. It is easy to see the prompt reflected if the writing is "clear" at this point. A less sophisticated writer will merely reiterate the prompt, whereas a more capable writer will rephrase enough of the prompt so as to include his own "take" on the topic.

Unless the prompt specifically denotes a "personal response" asking what the writer thinks, i.e., "Why do you ...", then more advanced writers avoid the use of personal pronouns.

If after reading the first paragraph the reader does not have a clear idea of what the topic is and does not know the writer's stance on the topic the paper is likely not going to score above a level 5 on clarity.

The meaningful details, elaborations, and examples serve to help the author make the case for the stance he/she has taken. Once the topic is clearly stated in a topic or thesis statement, it is essential that the writer start to "lay out his stance" or his approach to the topic. Details may appear as nuances regarding the topic – expressed understandings that demonstrate that the writer is aware of "layers" the topic might have. Arguments are then made using aligned elaborations and examples. Watch for unneeded repetition at this point. Writers who have only one "take" on a topic will simply repeat that same take over and over again trying to make the sentences sound unique. However, if as you are scoring this you put checkmarks or similar notations on the script as you read you will easily be able to note new or repeated ideas. Less sophisticated writing is ambiguous with vague "tangents" that may or may not add to the argument. Oftentimes, these types of vague statements distract from the writer's original thesis.

If there are gaps in clarity and odd inclusions of details/examples, a score of 4 or lower on the rubric would be appropriate in terms of clarity. Writing at these low levels indicates that the writer might not fully understand the prompt or topic. It is also possible that while the writer might understand the topic, no clear intention of where the paper is going is demonstrated.

"Support and elaboration is the extension and development of the topic/subject. The writer provides sufficient elaboration to present the ideas and/or events clearly" (Bowen, 2000, np).

Bowen, K. Cali, K. (2000). *Teaching the features of effective writing*. Retrieved from <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/few/686>

Strong topic sentences and a strong closing passage

These criteria focus on giving the audience an immediate sense of “what this is about” and move the readers to a closing passage/paragraph that signifies a “completion of thought.” At the higher end of the rubric (8, 7, 6), writers directly address the topic of the paper. Readers should know immediately what the paper is about. Typically, this is accomplished in a complete thought that serves as an introduction to the topic and addresses it head-on. This is often referred to as a “topic sentence” and it is usually within the first sentence or at least the first couple of sentences of the first paragraph. Most writers of high school age will start a paragraph with the topic sentence as they may not have developed the style needed to cleverly lead the reader to the topic deeper within the paragraph.

In discerning a “strong” topic sentence, scorers need to look for clearly written, specifically stated, declarative sentences that provide a complete thought/stance regarding the topic. Since students will be writing to a particular prompt, it is important for scorers to read the prompt carefully to determine that the specific topic expected to be written about is clearly stated within the first few sentences. Besides clarity and specificity of topic, it is also important that topic sentences demonstrate that the writer understands the question being expressed in the prompt. If a topic sentence is clear, addresses a topic logically, and even piques the reader’s interest it is not going to score well if the writer has misunderstood the prompt. It is possible to misunderstand the prompt and still demonstrate strong writing skills. In that case, the evaluators will have to make a judgment call. The writing would have to be very strong to overshadow the glitch in either not reading the prompt carefully enough or simply misunderstanding the prompt. In reality, as clearly as the writers of the prompts tried to be, there is still room for misinterpretation.

Just as the topic sentence is essential to alerting the reader to the subject and possibly the “take” on the subject, it is essential that the closing reiterate the subject of the piece and the author’s take on it. This might be done in a summary that restates the purpose of the piece and highlights the essential arguments and/or examples. This might be done in a challenge to the readers through questions that still remain unanswered within the piece. As an example, let’s say the prompt has to do with abortion. The topic sentence(s) might address the continued controversy and beliefs regarding abortion. The author might then go into some examples or reasons people differ in their opinions on this topic. The conclusion might be a recap of all the complications, considerations, and questions that each person has to address to express an informed opinion on the topic. Ending this type of piece with questions is a manner of how a strong closing passage might be constructed.

If you as a scorer and reader do not know within the first very few sentences what the paper is about, then it is not possible for the paper to score above a 4 or 5. If the student does start strong, provides cohesive thoughts throughout, but then ends abruptly or with no real feeling of resolution, then it is a harder call. A paper like that might be a 6 assuming that time constraints interrupted the writer before the final thoughts could be composed. If the paper, however, is not cohesive throughout and flounders at any point, scoring above a 5 would likely not be appropriate.

“Think of your writing as the opposite of a joke: give the punch line first” (Mraz, 2007, 48).

“Answer the question ‘so what?’ Show your readers why this paper was important. Show them that your paper was meaningful and useful” (Holewa, 2004, np).

Holewa, R. (2004). *Strategies for writing a conclusion*. Retrieved from <http://leo.stcloudstate.edu/acadwrite/conclude.html>

Mraz, S.J. (2007). *How to write well*. Retrieved from <http://machinedesign.com/article/how-to-write-well-0208>

Sentence structure is good, including style and effectiveness.

In its most simple form, a sentence is a group of words that express a complete thought. The structure of a sentence involves the way the clauses in a sentence are arranged. The number and types of clauses within a sentence determine if the sentence is simple, compound, or complex. We expect students to use all types of sentences in a well-written piece. An overreliance on simple sentences feels choppy and provides little evidence of writing style. The effective use of compound and complex sentences demonstrates a writer's proficiency and experience in expressing himself clearly in print. The pursuit of using more sophisticated sentence structure is also where many students demonstrate gaps in knowledge of how to construct those sentences. The real loss here is in meaning – what is it the writer is trying to communicate? Occasionally, a sentence is not technically incorrect (grammar-wise), but it is nonetheless so awkward that the reader is not sure what the writer means. That is a serious infraction. It would be very difficult for a paper to score above a 5 if the meaning becomes indiscernible at any point in the piece.

Another consideration is the writer's style. A total absence of style would be a voiceless series of sentences that, when all is said and done, communicated little or nothing. These read as if the writer took the prompt and said it back on paper as many times and ways as they could think of to fill a page/time limit. The writer brought little to the page and while there might not have been any glaring misuses of sentence structure, the real purpose of the writing assessment has not been met in that the student did very little to demonstrate his writing abilities. "Flat line" papers like this would not warrant a score above a 5.

If, however, voice is discernable within the piece at the same time that meaning and coherency are strong, then this would go to the "plus" side indicating a 6 or above in scoring. The next level of proficiency would be to determine how effective the style is in making the paper truly interesting. Only the best papers will reach this level. Remember that the random assignment of topics within the writing prompts will play heavily on how well any writer can demonstrate this level of proficiency. If a strong writer is assigned a topic they have little knowledge of, or interest in, chances are not very good that the paper will reflect the writer's true style or effectiveness. However, the range of "pass/fail" should be broad enough that good writing will score above the cut without the writer having the choice and time that good writers really need to fully demonstrate his writing skills.

"Good writers transform knowledge when writing, whereas poor writers often simply engage in "knowledge telling" without trying to clearly organize their ideas" (Bouffard, Ferrari, Rainville, 1998, 474).

Bouffard, T. Ferrari, M. Rainville, L. (1998). *What makes a good writer? Differences in good and poor writers' self-regulation of writing*. Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publisher

Word choice is almost always accurate and demonstrates an advanced vocabulary.

When selecting words, it is vital for the reader's comprehension to select words that are precise and clearly express the appropriate idea. If the words are used incorrectly, then the author's intended purpose is irrelevant. Incorrect words cannot lead to the intended purpose. However, if the words are correctly used but do not express the intended purpose, then the writer has not succeeded. Both correct word choice and expression of meaning and intent must be used simultaneously for the desired effect to be achieved.

Another extremely important issue to consider is to use a variety of words. While a correct intent can be conveyed with extremely repetitive vocabulary, a greater impact and pleasing readability will be met with varied word choice. However, it is imperative to note that simply using "thesaurus" words can have a detrimental effect. Word choice should, above all, be correct in usage. Simply using different words to increase the variety will not have the desired effect if the words are not carefully chosen, and more importantly, fully understood by the writer.

Related to choosing varied word choice is to avoid repetition. Using the same words close to each other in sentences can result in the reader having his or her attention forced out of the essay. This repetition is often only noticed by the writer during a re-reading of the essay.

Slang is never appropriate in a formal writing piece. However, non-slang language can also result in a very casual essay. Writers should be aware of avoiding clichés as well. Clichés are considered lazy language, as the writer is putting the onus of understanding on the reader.

Proofreading mistakes

Any proofreading mistakes and some errors in standard written English (such as in sentence structure, verb and pronoun use, punctuation, spelling, and capitalization), **are minimal and** do not hamper communication.

When reading an essay, the audience expects the writing to be free of errors and easy to understand. Fortunately for the writer, some types of proofreading mistakes are more allowable than others.

Even proficient writers can make mechanical proofreading errors such as commas. Some of these mistakes can be due to seemingly inconsistent comma usage rules, while others, like the Oxford comma, can be a matter of personal preference. Misplaced or misused commas are one type of error that can be overlooked, as they are unlikely to hamper communication. One instance where improper comma usage can hinder the writer's intent is the misuse of commas in series. Colons and semicolons are another instance where incorrect mechanical usage can be apparent but still not affect the author's communication.

Grammatical errors can cause significantly greater damage to the writer's message than mechanical errors. For instance, incorrect verb tense is never acceptable. Even writers who do not have a firm mechanical grasp of writing should be able to use correct verb tense if they are fluent speakers of the language. Akin to this is subject-verb agreement, especially with issues of singularity and plurality. While many students may not know the exact rule that singular subjects should have plural verbs and vice versa, they recognize phrases such as "students know" as correct and "students knows" or "student know" as incorrect because of the way it sounds to their ear.

Another issue that can be missed in proofreading is vague pronouns. Pronoun use should be clear. If the writer states he, she, it, they, et cetera, the pronoun should directly reference the subject. This can be especially problematic for writers when addressing two speakers of the same gender (or two "its," et cetera). Many writers have difficulty distinguishing this as well, as they know what their original intention was and may miss this, even with close proofreading.

One thing that overzealous graders should be aware of is following "strict grammatical rules" that may not, in fact, be rules. Some armchair grammarians believe that it is never appropriate to end a sentence with a preposition, while there are actually many circumstances where it is not only acceptable to do this but appropriate. Provided the sentence follows the standards of conventional English, such as consistent and correct verb tense and agreement, the primary concern should be with the author's intended message being conveyed accurately.

Sweet-Spot Scoring: Is it a 6 or is it a 5?

Good writing is readable. A reader relaxes into the development of ideas. Readers can sense a thread that runs through a piece of writing that not only connects the ideas being presented, but also provides provocative notions.

Good writing is focused. The reader does not feel a sense of whiplash from being slammed with details, examples, or tangents the writer includes for no obvious purpose. If anything pulls the reader away from the goal of the piece that is an example of how the writer (and ultimately the reader) lost focus.

Good writing is skillfully scripted. A reader finds himself/herself experiencing internal or external smiles, head-nods, and may even reread to admire a good “turn of phrase.” The reader will feel delightfully PULLED toward the goal of the piece. The writer will have used conscious organizational skills to ensure that there is logic in play as to how the case or argument is made. It is clear to the reader that the author is aware of how people take in information and construct meaning from print.

Good writing is deliberately aware of the reader. The reader can ascertain the voice of the writer and feels compelled to keep reading. Very soon within a piece of writing the reader feels they know something of the author. The reader must be able to sense the author’s passion without the writing becoming cliché or didactic.

If you have evaluated a writing piece and the decision comes down between a 6 or 5 on the rubric, re-read using the criteria above. A level 6 must ultimately be “good” writing. If the writing sample does not meet the criteria above, it should be scored no higher than a 5.