

**Frequently
Asked
Questions**

Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA)
Writing Assessment
Grades 5, 8, and 11— February 2009
Information for Parents or Guardians



Which schools participate?

All school districts participate in the writing assessment. Nonpublic and private schools may also participate on a voluntary basis.

Which students take the assessment?

All students in grades 5, 8, and 11 are included in the assessment (except for a few students who meet specific criteria).

When does the assessment occur?

The assessment is scheduled by the school district to take place during the testing window of February 9 through February 20, 2009.

How long does the assessment take?

The entire writing assessment takes approximately four to six hours to complete. Your school district should inform you about the assessment schedule.

What does the assessment include?

The assessment consists of twenty multiple-choice revising and editing questions and three writing prompts. Some portions of the assessment will be the same for all students, and some will consist of different groups of items. All items were written to align with Pennsylvania's Academic Standards for Writing.

What is assessed in writing?

The writing assessment provides a direct performance measure of students' abilities to develop, organize, and express their ideas in a variety of writing situations. The writing assessment is intended to evaluate performances of individual students, to provide comparative data about the school's writing program, and to serve as a validity check of the school's local assessment of writing.

Who decided what the assessment should measure?

Groups of educators from all levels of education in Pennsylvania chose the areas of knowledge on which the assessment is based. The groups included teachers, supervisors, curriculum directors, and college specialists. These groups also reviewed, edited, and approved the test items.

Who administers the assessment?

Each school chooses the person(s) who will administer the assessment. In most cases, these are the students' teachers, who are often helped by the principal or a guidance counselor.

How are the written responses scored?

Evaluators trained in applying a holistic scoring system will score the written responses to the writing prompts. The holistic system includes a mode-specific scoring guideline which addresses the student's composition for the effective application of focus, content development, organization, and style. The system also includes a conventions scoring guideline which addresses the student's use of conventions (sentence formation, grammar, usage, spelling, and punctuation). Composition and conventions are scored separately on 4-point scales to indicate the writer's level of proficiency.

How are the results reported?

Two copies of the individual student report for writing will be sent to the school districts for distribution to parents, teachers, guidance counselors, and/or principals. The state will not receive any report with individual names included.

School-level reports will be used for curricular and planning purposes. School districts may publish the results of PSSA testing for each school. The state will also release school-by-school assessment data.

May parents see the assessment?

Parents and guardians may review the writing assessment by making arrangements with the school assessment coordinator once the assessment arrives at the school. Confidentiality agreements must be signed, and no copies of the assessment or notes about assessment items will be permitted to leave the school.

If, after reviewing the assessment, parents do not want their child to participate in the writing assessment due to a conflict with their religious beliefs, they may write to the school district superintendent prior to the beginning of the assessment to request to excuse their child from the assessment.