

NCTE Achievement Awards in Writing Judging Criteria

WRITING SAMPLES

Two pieces of writing are required of each nominee to help judges gain insight into the student as a writer.

Best Writing—may include **prose, verse, or a combination** not to exceed ten typed, double-spaced pages.

A wide variety of compositions representing nominees' best pieces of writing may be expected. In many instances, a committee of teachers, who have judged the portfolios of prospective nominees, will have examined the best writing samples. A judge may well ask, "How can I compare the relative worth of a poem and an essay?" The only honest answer is that one can't. Yet the piece of writing may be judged in terms of itself. The major question to ask is whether the sample, whatever its type, reveals high achievement in writing for a student of this grade level.

Research papers, term papers, and novels are not accepted as samples for best writing. Research papers are defined as projects based on library sources, with frequent references to the ideas of other writers and documented with footnotes, endnotes, or internal citations and/or bibliography. Papers that refer informally to the thoughts of other writers for purposes of support are acceptable.

Impromptu Writing—all students write on one of two topics. They have two hours in which to compose, revise, and complete their papers. On this assignment, judges have the opportunity to evaluate writing done within a strict time limit. Although students may regularly answer questions on an examination in school within a time limit, some may not have had the experience of writing an essay under timed conditions. Judges need to take into account that writing under pressure is a difficult task. Judges, especially those teaching in colleges, are also reminded that high school juniors do this writing. Their responses to the assigned topic may not be the equivalent of those written by high school seniors or first-year college students.

EVALUATING WRITING SAMPLES

In evaluating the two pieces of writing, judges should consider the effectiveness of each piece in terms of its own purpose. The comprehensive question is whether or not the writer exhibits power to inform and move an audience through control of a large range of the English language. If the student does not show an inquiring mind coping with real issues, a composition should receive a low score. Fuzziness should not be mistaken for profundity, nor mechanical sloppiness for originality. Although editorial correctness is a virtue, meaningful variations should be allowed and the mere absence of mechanical error should not be overvalued. Excellent writers may err under the conditions of impromptu writing. As a rule, flawed brilliance is to be preferred over correct dullness.

Judges should recommend nominees who are clearly outstanding, whose works could be printed in a magazine or local newspaper as representing the best high school writing in the state. Two different judges read each nominee's entry. Judges and coordinators should approve as winners only those students who appear to be outstanding writers on the basis of their Achievement Awards entries. **To be cited as a winner, a student must have a total score of 22 to 24.** The written selections should be judged holistically—that is, in terms of their total effect—using the following guidelines:

- 6 Potential in writing fully developed for the grade level, with distinguishing characteristics that give the writing an identity of its own
- 5 Potential realized, showing competence with language and control in the development of the topic
- 4 Potential evident, but unevenness suggests that the writer is not yet in full command of the composing process
- 3 Potential partially indicated, but limited by shortcomings that call undue attention to themselves
- 2 Potential obscured by major flaws in the thought and development of the writing
- 1 Potential in writing undeveloped

Judges recommend student writing for publication on the NCTE website. Only student entries with parental permission are considered. Recommended papers are judged again to select a few papers for the website.

NCTE Achievement Awards in Writing

GUIDELINES FOR INTERPRETING THE HOLISTIC WRITING EVALUATION SCALE

To help judges differentiate between good essays and poor ones, the following is intended to represent strengths and weaknesses in terms of factors that should enter into the judgment of a written composition. Judges determine gradations of these qualities between 6 and 1.

STRENGTHS

CONTENT

- Independence of thought
- Writer's engagement with topic
- Fresh insights

PURPOSE/AUDIENCE/TONE

- Focus and intent clear and consistent
- Language and tone appropriate to purpose and audience

WORDS: CHOICE AND ARRANGEMENT

- Concern for expressiveness and clear communication
- Apt choice of words
- Readable, unambiguous sentences

ORGANIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT

- Logical progression, easy to follow
- Adequate support and elaboration
- Sense of completeness and closure meaningful paragraphing

STYLE

- Fluent, readable prose
- Sentence structure treated flexibly
- Appropriate use of metaphor, analogy, parallelism, and other rhetorical devices
- Occasional willingness to be daring in thought and word; signs of inventiveness

TECHNICAL QUALITIES, MECHANICS

- Sustained point of view; tenses used appropriately
- Grammatical accuracy
- Punctuation use for clarity and effect
- Respect for manuscript conventions: spelling, capitalization, hyphenation

QUALITIES ESPECIALLY APPLICABLE TO FICTION, DRAMA, AND POETRY

- Keen observation and reflection
- Imaginative insight
- Sensitivity to nuances of words
- Control of formal elements: point of view, chronology
- Effective use of figurative language

WEAKNESSES

CONTENT

- Preponderance of obvious statements
- Writer uninvolved with topic
- Subject treated perfunctorily

PURPOSE/AUDIENCE/TONE

- Purpose unclear or unrealized
- Tone inconsistent or uncontrolled

WORDS: CHOICE AND ARRANGEMENT

- Limited vocabulary or misuse of words
- Indulges in clichés
- Awkward or faulty sentences

ORGANIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT

- Little sense of direction or organization
- Few particulars or examples offered as support
- Intent of paragraphing unclear

STYLE

- Prose either effusive or cramped
- Unvaried sentence structure
- General absence of rhetorical devices
- Tendency to play safe with words and ideas

TECHNICAL QUALITIES, MECHANICS

- Point of view unclear
- Grammatical errors
- Punctuation errors

QUALITIES ESPECIALLY APPLICABLE TO FICTION, DRAMA, AND POETRY

- Absence of meaningful detail
- Unimaginative
- Use of hackneyed words and phrases
- Lack of facility with formal elements
- Failure to accomplish desired effect