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# Deconstructing the WritePlacer for the College Transition Classroom

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Summer 2012

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As students complete their GEDs or graduate from high school and begin preparation for college, many are surprised to find that their days taking standardized tests have not come to an end. If they are headed to a community college, the Accuplacer© mostly likely awaits them. With more rigorous standards than the GED, many adult students will need to continue their education prior to entering college. In the College Transition classroom, we as educators can give them the tools required to successfully qualify for credit-level classes during their first semesters of college.

With that in mind, College Transition teachers need to be examining each of the subjects that the students will need to demonstrate mastery. The exact battery of required tests varies from one school to the next, as do cut scores. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the finer points of the WritePlacer©, how it is scored, how it differs from the GED essay, and what techniques the College Transition teacher can use to prepare students for the exam.

### **What is the WritePlacer?**

The WritePlacer is the essay portion of the Accuplacer. Students are given a prompt and asked to compose a 300 to 600-word essay based on a provided prompt. The entire Accuplacer is computer based, so students must complete their essays using the computer without the aid of a spelling or grammar checking software. It does, however, provide a word count. Since the

test is taken on the computer, students need to have at least minimal keyboard skills to complete the test in a reasonable amount of time.

The prompts for the WritePlacer usually consist of a short passage and then a question. The question requires students to draw from their past experiences and their own knowledge and ideas to support the arguments within the essay. Prompts do not require specific prior knowledge of a technical, historical, or literary nature. The topics do require a level of critical thinking from the student in order to successfully show mastery of their writing skills. (The College Board)

One of the advantages of the WritePlacer over the GED essay is that the WritePlacer is untimed. Students are allowed as much time as is necessary to complete the Accuplacer; however, as a general rule, students are not recommended to take more than 3 hours on a particular day to complete the entire battery of tests. Usually, students who have at least a basic proficiency working with a computer can complete the WritePlacer in about an hour. Since they are not under the time constraints they endured with the GED, many students find the WritePlacer to be a much easier experience. The Accuplacer, as a whole, does not have the same level of “high-stakes” fear that is associated with the GED.

Students with disabilities may apply for accommodations for taking the Accuplacer. Students requesting accommodations must apply with the school in which they are taking their tests and provide the required documentation. These typically require documents from a medical doctor, psychiatrist, or other qualified professional. While all schools will conform to the guidelines of the Americans with Disabilities Act, it is the responsibility of the student to provide all the paperwork necessary to receive the requested accommodations.

## How is the WritePlacer scored?

For many students preparing for the Accuplacer, the WritePlacer is the most mysterious of all of the pieces. While it is easy to see how a computer can grade a multiple choice test, knowing that your essay will be graded by one is a little unnerving. Will it understand my style? How accurate is it? Can it really be as good as a human grader?

While these seem to be valid concerns, the research has shown that the technology behind the grading system is as accurate as human graders. Numerous studies have been conducted that demonstrate the accuracy of the WritePlacer grading when compared to that of a panel of experts grading the same essays (Wang 3). In one study of “student responses to an eighth grade writing test, IntelliMetric [the system driving the WritePlacer grader] scores agreed with the experts about 98% of the time; the two experts agreed with each other 96% of the time.” (23)

Many people fear that with a computer grading the essay, word combinations and phrases might not be recognized correctly; however, the system employs a vocabulary of more than 500,000 words and a more than 16 million word concept net that will understand word combinations. (18) It is safe to assume that any phrase construct that would be understood by the average human grader would also be understood by the WritePlacer. That does not, unfortunately, exclude the idea that the very latest slang would not be correctly identified. However, it is also true that the latest slang may not be identified correctly by all human graders so it is always best to direct students to avoid such word/phrase usage.

The system examines the essay on more than 400 features including basic mechanical issues (such as spelling, punctuation, and capitalization) and more complex areas (such as expression of concepts, elaboration, and word choices). These areas are not all weighted equally, and the computer provides a holistic score. (14-15)

Two of the advantages to this type of grading are consistency and speed. While all human graders try to be objective, the computer will not be offended by radical ideas when it examines the essays. In addition, with a human grader, it is unlikely that the first essay of the batch will be graded to the same standards as the 30<sup>th</sup>, 40<sup>th</sup> or 50<sup>th</sup> essay in that stack. The computer will apply the same criteria evenly regardless of how many it has graded. It will also do it far faster than a human can. As someone who has proctored the Accuplacer many times, I know I could not process that many tests as quickly as the WritePlacer does.

### **How does the WritePlacer differ from the GED?**

In many ways, the WritePlacer and GED essays are very similar. Both require many of the same skills that will be used in any type of writing assignment. However, there are a few areas where the two tests diverge. It is important for the College Transition teacher to know what those areas are, and what they can do to prepare their students who have just completed the GED to shift gears into the new style of writing.

Both test require a standard “5-paragraph essay” format. The Introduction/Body/Conclusion style of writing that teachers use for their GED students will still serve them well when they transition to preparation for the WritePlacer. The organizational style, which is

taught in most adult education writing classrooms, will continue to be the foundation of the College Transition classroom. WritePlacer essays require an introduction that includes a thesis statement, 3 to 4 body paragraphs with topic sentences and supporting evidence, and a conclusion that summarizes the students' ideas and thoughts.

This is probably the best news the students could hear. Often students hear that they must write an essay on the Accuplacer and begin to worry that all the work they have done on the GED will have to be 'undone' and new techniques learned. This, luckily, is not the case. The preparation for the GED will continue to serve them well as they sit down in front of the computer.

Whatever techniques teachers currently use in their GED classrooms to help students with brainstorming and organization will continue to be effective on the WritePlacer. I have included copies of my brainstorming and flowchart graphic organizers in the Appendix section. These can be useful for students who are learning to effectively structure their ideas into a cohesive essay.

The biggest difference between the two essays lies in the prompt. The GED currently employs a personal narrative style of writing; the WritePlacer style tends to require more depth and critical thinking. While neither prompt will require in depth prior knowledge of technology, history, or literature, the WritePlacer prompt tends to question the students personal philosophy a bit deeper. By expecting the student to be able to provide a deeper analysis, the WritePlacer raises the standards of the essay required. While someone who wrote a brilliant essay on the GED would most likely do very well on the WritePlacer as well, it will be the

students who have marginally passed the GED who are mostly likely to struggle with the WritePlacer.

The following example of a WritePlacer prompt is taken from the WritePlacer guide (2):

#### Passage

*An actor, when his cue came, was unable to move onto the stage. He said, "I can't get it, the chair is in the way." And the producer said, "Use the difficulty. If it's a drama, pick the chair up and smash it. If it's comedy, fall over it." From this experience the actor concluded that in any situation in life that is negative, there is something positive you can do with it.*

Adapted from Lawrence Eisenberg, "Caine Scrutiny."

#### Assignment

*Can any obstacle or disadvantage be turned into something good?*

As you can see from this example, a personal narrative will not suffice. Students can certainly draw from their personal experiences and prior knowledge to provide examples to prove their arguments; however, it will require a level of analysis to receive a passing grade.

The second major difference between the two essays will be in grading. In the Appendix, I have included a chart that compares the scoring rubric for the GED with the scoring rubric of the WritePlacer. Most of the criteria align: Response to Prompt, Organization, Development & Details, Conventions of Edited American English, and Word Choice from the GED rubric each have an analogous criterion on the WritePlacer Rubric. The one exception would be Critical Thinking on the WritePlacer. This criterion explores the extent to which the writer communicates a point of view and demonstrates relationships among ideas. (The College Board 1)



Teachers must also be aware of the cut scores required by their local community college. While a “5” seems to be fairly standard, some schools accept a “4” or a “6” as the minimum for admission into a credit level class. Students scoring below this would be required to take developmental classes, which, while helping in developing skills, do not count toward a degree (while maintaining the price tag associated with credit-bearing classes). Students can find themselves using all of their financial aid and amassing huge student loan debt before they even begin working on their degrees.

When you compare the scoring criteria of a passing minimum score of “2” on the GED with the requirements for a “5” on the WritePlacer, you will notice some significant differences. In almost every area, the standards for a WritePlacer 5 are closer to a GED 3. For example, the GED rubric says in Organization, a passing essay with a score of 2 “shows some evidence of an organizational plan” while a “3” essay “uses an identifiable organizational plan.” This more closely aligns with the WritePlacer description of a “5” which states the essay “is generally organized and focused but lacks coherence and logical progression of ideas. Students will need to be aware of the fact that a more advanced level of writing will be required.

## **Tips for Teachers**

Teachers, who have been working with GED students, often already have a “toolbox” filled with exercises that can help students prepare for their essay tests. Most of these will still be useful when working with College Transition students. The work really comes down to

helping students extend their current skill base to prepare for the more rigorous standard of the WritePlacer. Here are lists of specific assignments that will push students to a college level of writing that should be exhibited on the WritePlacer.

First, frequent timed writing exercises. By having students work toward creating their essays using a one-hour time limit, students will be more comfortable with the format when they are presented with the Accuplacer. While the test is officially untimed, it will still aid them when they are in that testing situation. Review “Step for Completing a Timed Writing” (from the Appendix) with your students for 10 rules to help improve their scores.

Second, typing practice. Since the WritePlacer is computer-based, it is essential that the students become comfortable using the computer to write their essays. This will also aid them a great deal in college since most schools use a system like BlackBoard for all student work. Students will need to be comfortable working with submitting their essays electronically when they get to college so it is in their best interest if they have to submit them to you that way as well.

Third, vocabulary practice. One of the components of the WritePlacer rubric involves word choice. The level 8 standard for Sentence Variety & Style states the essay “exhibits skillful use of language, using a varied, accurate, and apt vocabulary.” (The College Board 19) The Townsend Press Vocabulary Series (including Improving Vocabulary Skills, Advancing Vocabulary Skills, and Advanced Word Power) is a good way to help with students improve their vocabulary. ([www.townsendpress.com](http://www.townsendpress.com).)

As College Transition teachers, we can assist them in preparing for this test only if we understand what they are getting into. I feel the best thing the teacher can do to help the students is to take the WritePlacer. By taking the actual test, the teacher will be able to better understand the types of prompts given and the style the Assignment is looking for. This will better prepare the teacher for creating the lessons for the students.

The WritePlacer may seem like the most daunting part of the Accuplacer for some students, but when viewed next to the GED essay, they have little to worry about. With a little practice, most students become comfortable working in the timed-writing style while typing their essays. For the College Transition teacher, only minor modifications are needed to adjust from the GED essay that are scoring 2s and 3s to the WritePlacer essay that are bringing in the 7s and 8s.

## **Appendix**

- A. Comparison Chart between GED and WritePlacer Rubrics
- B. Spider diagram graphic organizer
- C. Flow Chart graphic organizer
- D. Steps for Completing a Timed Writing

## **Comparison Chart between GED and WritePlacer Rubrics**

GED Rubric information is from GED Scoreboost Writing (Van Slyke)

WritePlacer Rubric information is from The College Board

## Spider diagram graphic organizer

1. Have students choose one word that is the central theme of the essay and write that word in the middle of the diagram.
2. Then, the students will brainstorm to fill the 'legs' of the spider, adding any idea that comes to mind.
3. It is important for the students to realize that at this point there are no "wrong" answers. Any idea can be useful. Often students find that while one idea is not exactly on point, it will lead them to discover an idea that is.
4. After completing the spider, have students select the main ideas from the diagram that are most significant to the topic. These will become Idea 1, Idea 2, and Idea 3 on the Flow chart.

## Flow Chart graphic organizer

1. After completing the Spider, students will transfer their three most important ideas to the Flow Chart in the boxes marked "Idea 1," "Idea 2," and "Idea 3."
2. Using items from the Spider, or after further examination, have the students list three supporting details for each of the main ideas.
3. Now that the students understand the body of the essay, have them find the one unifying theme that is supported by their three main ideas. Have the students write a single sentence that defines that unifying theme. Write this sentence in the box at the top labeled "Main Idea." This sentence will be used as their thesis statement for the essay.
4. They are now ready to begin writing their essays
  - a. Use thesis statement as the foundation for their introduction,
  - b. Use Idea 1 in the topic sentence for body paragraph 1 with the Supporting Ideas to fill out the remainder of the paragraph,
  - c. Use Idea 2 for body paragraph 2,
  - d. Use Idea 3 for body paragraph 3,
  - e. Then, returning to the Main Idea box, have students restate their thesis for the conclusion.

## Steps for Completing a Timed Writing

1. Read the topic carefully several times. The prompt is written in two parts: the Passage, and the Assignment. The Passage will provide background information, and the Assignment will tell you what to write about.
2. Pay special attention to the prompt in the Assignment part of the prompt. What do they want you to do? Analyze? Compare/Contrast? Discuss? Prove? Make sure you understand exactly what the Assignment wants you to do. Remember: writing a perfect essay that does not respond to the prompt will result in a failing grade.
3. Plan your work. Use the first 10 minutes of your time brainstorming and organizing your thoughts. Organization is a key component of the grading system. It needs to be clear and easy to follow.
4. Write a solid Thesis Statement. It's more important to have a good thesis statement than an attention grabbing hook.
5. Begin each body paragraph with a topic sentence. While it is possible to place a topic sentence at the end or even in the middle of a paragraph, opening with it during a timed writing is more direct and keeps you from wandering off topic.
6. Use transitional words and phrases to make each paragraph flow into the next.
7. Write in active voice. Passive voice reduces the writing level and is boring. You don't want to bore the computer grading your essay. 😊
8. Close the essay with a conclusion that restates the thesis and summarizes the essay. If you find yourself running out of time, quickly knock out a one-sentence conclusion. It will hurt your score more to have no conclusion than to have a very short one.
9. Choose your words carefully. Rich, accurate, and precise vocabulary is essential for improving your score.



10. Keep an eye on your time. You want to finish writing with at least 5 minutes to spare so you can proofread your essay. You don't want the computer to think you can't spell simply because you have some typos that would be easily corrected before you hit submit.

## Sample Prompts

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### Passage

*We are all inventors, each sailing out on a voyage of discovery, guided each by a private chart, of which there is no duplicate. The world is all gates, all opportunities.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

### Assignment

*In a world full of gates and opportunities and each of us guided by a private chart, it would be easy to lose one's way. How does one maintain course on his/her voyage of discovery? Or is maintaining a certain course less important than the voyage itself?*

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### Passage

*If you want to succeed in the world you must make your own opportunities as you go on. The man who waits for some seventh wave to toss him on dry land will find that the seventh wave is a long time a coming. You can commit no greater folly than to sit by the roadside until some one comes along and invites you to ride with him to wealth or influence.*

John B. Gough

### Assignment

*Gough suggests that inaction is the greatest folly. Comparing this quote with the adage, "Good things come to those who wait," where does the greatest advantage lie? Why?*

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### Passage

*"I've missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed."*

Michael Jordan

**Assignment**

*Michael Jordan's claim that having failed over and over has led to his success. Why would repeated failure lead to success?*

## Works Cited

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