

*Preparing Students for Georgia’s State-Mandated
Preliminary Writing Assessment Test:
A Day in the Life of a High School Teacher*

Milka Mosley

*Etowah High School, Woodstock, Georgia,
and Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, Georgia*

Introduction

As soon as the first faculty meeting is over at the beginning of each new school year, I go straight to my classroom, equipped with all the new handouts and handbooks, and start working on my school calendar. I usually use Microsoft Publisher to make the calendar, and I quickly enter all the school holidays, workdays, and—most important—the testing dates. I teach tenth-grade honors world literature at Etowah High School in Woodstock, Georgia, which is one of the best public schools in the state. In recent years, we have received several accolades: the Gold Award from the Governor’s Office of Student Achievement (one of six high schools in Georgia to receive the award) and the Georgia School of Excellence Award (one of four high schools) for outstanding student achievement in academics. I feel very fortunate to be part of my school’s success, and I take each day as an opportunity to help my students develop their academic strengths and gifts and pave their way toward a successful future (as reflected by our school mission statement, “Preparing Life-Long Learners and Productive Citizens”).

According to the testing schedule, students are required to take the Preliminary SAT (PSAT) in October and the Preliminary Writing Assessment Test (PWAT) in November. I enjoy teaching tenth-grade honors English because I do not have to worry about the End of Course Test (EOCT), which is given to ninth and eleventh graders in English at the end of the school year. Usually, I start the school year with practices for the PSAT right away; Friday is my PSAT

practice day, and my students work independently, using a few sets of PSAT booklets I have collected over the past few years. In 2008, we started offering students two SAT and two ACT practice questions twice a week during study hall so that we can raise our school's scores and help students choose which test to take when applying to college. I think the PSAT and study hall practices are helpful in preparing students for SAT and ACT tests. These practices not only help my students think about college, they also help them determine their strengths and weaknesses and decide whether to take the SAT or the ACT to help them get into the college of their choice.

That being said, over the past twenty years, I have noticed that the number of tests given to high school students has increased significantly. It seems as if we are testing—or preparing for some type of test—much of the time lately. When I first started teaching years ago, testing was not this widespread; students took only the Basic Skills Test, which was used as an exit exam at the end of their senior year. I remember that all I wanted to do then was help my students appreciate the beauty of the written and spoken word and expose them to great works of literature (I am from Macedonia; I learned English in school, and I adore the language in all of its aspects). I also strove to provide opportunities for my students to gain confidence and pride in their work. I did not worry too much about regular vocabulary quizzes and tests on the readings and grammar because we went through all of those materials in class together. Usually, the grades earned reflected how prepared and capable students were, as well as their level of dedication toward their studies. We used these scores primarily for assigning students to basic, general, college preparatory, or honors classes.

Nowadays, students and schools are compared to their counterparts not only in their own county but also throughout the state. We now tailor our classroom instruction according to the

data derived from these tests, which become important objectives in our School Improvement Plan. Unlike the Basic Skills Test, the new exit tests are subject oriented; we have the End of Course Test (EOCT) as well as the Georgia High School Graduation Test (GHSGT), which cover material studied in the different subject areas. Even though these tests sometimes take time away from the classroom learning environment, they are a necessary evil because they address the issue of accountability of students and teachers alike.

The Georgia High School Writing Test

According to the Georgia Department of Education, each eleventh-grade student must pass the Georgia High School Writing Test (GHSWT) “to earn a regular education diploma. Students are asked to produce a response to an on-demand persuasive writing prompt”:

Georgia law (O.C.G.A., Section 20-2-281) requires that writing assessment be administered to students in grades three, five, eight, and eleven. The State Writing Assessment Core Development and Advisory Committees assisted the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) in developing the writing component of the student assessment program. . . . The goal of the Writing Assessment Core Development and Advisory Committees and the GaDOE is to create developmentally appropriate assessment procedures to enhance statewide instruction in the language arts. Statewide writing assessments serve the purpose of improving writing and writing instruction.

(Georgia Department)

The state gives tenth graders the Preliminary Writing Assessment Test (PWAT) so that teachers can identify students who cannot produce an impromptu, persuasive essay and offer them tutoring to help them pass the GHSWT in the eleventh grade. I do not mind the PWAT; actually, I don't mind any type of *writing* assessment because it helps students develop fluency and confidence in writing. Most of my students are good writers, and the two-week period of test preparation is sufficient for them to learn to compose a competent piece of persuasive writing, which is one of the requirements of the county's Student Performance Standards, ELA10 W2: "The student produces persuasive writing that structures ideas and arguments in a sustained logical fashion" (Cherokee 8).

Before we started with actual writing, my students and I spent two days in class going over parts of Chapter 7, "Taking Sides," in our grammar book, *Elements of Language*. We read about writing an editorial, and then we read a few samples from the book: "Cleaning Up College Basketball" by Lee C. Bollinger and Tom Goss; a writer's model, "Cancel the Curfew"; and a student model, "School Uniforms, the \$80 Million Boondoggle." Contentwise, these three pieces were easy to understand because the issues are part of everyday high school life. As we read the three samples out loud together, we discussed the structure of the essays, as well as the different appeals (logical, emotional, and ethical) used to write an argument. The last two readings were printed with labels in the margins to show students which element was being discussed in a particular paragraph. This visual reminder, as well as the framework outlined in the textbook, helped students write an editorial of their own.

The next day, students wrote and shared their own editorials. The topics they addressed dealt with issues that pertain to their daily lives such as dress code, too much homework, driving age, school schedule, and cell phones, as well as larger issues such as obesity, immigration,

abortion, steroids and sports, and the controversy concerning the drought in Georgia that year.

Once we finished sharing, I asked students to write a brief reflection on what persuasive writing means to them. They had many definitions, such as the following:

- “Persuasive writing convinces and informs the reader about a topic.”
- “One can influence opinions through mere words.”
- “Express our feelings and communicate ideas.”
- “Is an effective way to get an idea or opinion across to a reader.”
- “Uses feelings and knowledge of one person to persuade another of a certain topic.”

I enjoyed reading the different definitions.

When I had transferred to Etowah High School from Sequoyah High School, the first thing I asked our media specialists to do was order the class set *Taking Sides*, consisting of twenty-seven books, each dealing with a different controversial issue. We used these books as our next step in learning about persuasive writing. I let students choose an issue from one of these books, and then I asked them to read and outline both sides, for and against, of that issue. This enabled students to expand their awareness and see how expert writers approach discussion of a controversial issue. Next, each student presented his or her newly accumulated knowledge on the chosen issue so that the entire class could learn more about different social concerns. Since my students follow an advanced program of study, I try to provide learning activities to enrich their knowledge about the world that surrounds them. I do this because one of the four domains they will be graded on is ideas.

A few weeks later, we started our actual practice writing. I gave each student a different prompt from a set I had assembled over the years. These prompts were similar to the ones on the

test and dealt with an issue that students could identify with, such as banning books, social promotion, solutions for waste management, teen driving, and other controversial topics. Students started their prewriting and drafting in class and finished the piece at home. This assignment helps students focus on the organization of their information (organization is another of the test domains). Likewise, I gave them a chance to revise their essays and encouraged them to use their best vocabulary and arguments, which helped them with another of the four grading domains—style. And, because the essays are also graded on the domain of conventions, I provided students with an opportunity to clean up their writing by following my checklist of errors that English teachers commonly mark on students’ papers.

Finally, students take the PWAT, which is ninety minutes long (and is usually held in the auditorium or cafeteria, neither of which provides an ideal testing environment). Since the test represents the completion of this unit, I want to know about my students’ thinking through the whole process. So, the day after the test, I asked them to write a reflection about the practice writing prompt I had given them and the actual test. It is important for me to see how they are learning and how I can improve my instruction the following year. When I reviewed their reflections, I noticed that students did not say much about the practice prompt except that it was good practice for the actual test. Some of the comments they made are as follows:

- “I must admit although I did not necessarily enjoy working on the writing prompt you assigned us over the weekend, it helped me on the actual writing test.”
- “It gave me a feel for what the test topics would be like.”
- “I actually learned how brainstorming and outlines were part of the writing process.”

- “I could easily see my strengths, such as good detail, and my weaknesses, like not proofreading well-enough.”
- “I knew what to do when we sat down to take the writing test.”
- “It served as excellent preparation for organization and composing a readable essay in a short amount of time.”

My students told me that they found the actual test prompt, “The Advantages and the Disadvantages of State Lotteries for Funding of Education,” uninteresting:

- “Although the topic for the writing test was not the topic I would have chosen, the in-class writing prompt did wonders in preparing me for the exam.”
- “The topic was one of the most ridiculous topics that I’ve ever written about.”
- “My topic was very vague to me. But after I read it a couple of times, I understood it. I wrote two pages defending my opinion of the lottery.”
- “The test was much easier because I had experience with prewriting, and writing the rough draft.”
- “I did not like the writing prompt.”
- “They should hire a new prompt writer.”

Writing Samples from the Preliminary Writing Assessment Test

A couple of days before Valentine’s Day, we received the scores from the tenth-grade PWAT, which predicts how well students will do on the graduation test in eleventh grade. Most of my students exceeded the standards. The rest met the standards with high scores, and only one student was on the borderline (but passed). The following description from GaDOE’s website discusses the criteria for meeting the standard:

Writing samples that meet the standard are generally focused on the assigned topic and persuasive purpose and contain a clear introduction, body, and conclusion. The writer's position is clear and sufficiently developed. Supporting ideas are developed with some examples and details, and the writer addresses some reader concerns. Supporting ideas are presented in a generally clear sequence. Related ideas are grouped together and connected with some transitions. Word choice is generally engaging, and there is some variation in sentence length and structure. The writer's voice is clear, and the writing shows awareness of the audience. Sentence formation, usage, and mechanics are generally correct, and errors do not interfere with meaning. The text is of sufficient length to demonstrate effective writing skills. (Georgia High)

For the remainder of this essay, I share some specific student responses to the writing prompt.

The first writing sample is an essay by a student named Angie. Her essay was assessed as a "borderline" pass:

The adoption of lotteries in many states has stirred up confrontation. Like many controversies, whether this idea is appropriate and moral or should be cast away has a lot to do with opinion. I believe that lotteries, though often frowned upon, uplift our community's well-being when used to fund and support educational programs.

The lotteries that our community leaders are providing and participating in should be safe, simple, and entertaining. The intensity of the competition should be just enough to stimulate and encourage our neighbors to join in. They should be kept fair and in no way influenced by the customers or the people holding the lottery. If people start to suspect that winning is highly improbable then not much profit will be made, because people will stop participating.

The amount of money put into creating and sustaining the lottery should be exceeded by the amount of money gained from selling tickets in order for this to be profitable to the educational programs. If this does not occur then the lotteries should be shut down. The success of this fundraiser lies in the profit it earns and the help it serves our community.

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When I examined Angie's essay, the first thing that I noticed was that it had a few cross-out smudges and was shorter than the essays that received higher scores. Her writing was legible, and she wrote in paragraph form. She also provided an introduction, body, and conclusion. She had no fragments or serious grammatical errors. She had a thesis statement, but she did not support it well and did not provide enough specifics to show the reader that she is well-informed on the issue. Obviously, lack of idea development is probably the key weakness in Angie's essay. However, in Angie's defense, I would like to use one of my student's comments concerning this particular writing prompt: "writing about the lottery was a silly prompt because tenth graders are not old enough to even purchase lottery tickets"!

The next sample is the essay written by Austin. His essay met the standards:

My fellow classmates, it has come to my attention that some people do not agree with states using lotteries to help fund programs. The reasoning behind this is that lotteries have forms of gambling in them and gambling is illegal in many states. I believe though that the advantages for using the lottery are much higher than the disadvantages of a lottery.



In many states gambling is illegal, with the exception of the lottery. For example, gambling is illegal in Georgia, but Georgia has the lottery to help fund a program called the Hope Scholarship. The Hope is one of the largest advantages of having a lottery, because it will help put many students who can not afford college, ~~go~~^{through} to college. Is that not worth having a lottery? I believe so. Another advantage of the lottery is that it could change a life. Someone who does not have much could win and have enough money to live off for the rest of their life. These are the main two advantages helping students go to college by paying for tuition for only making the students keep a three point zero average. Also changing someone's life.

Even though there are some very important advantages there are some disadvantages. One major dis advantage is that the lottery is gambling. With most of the money going to benefit college scholarships it can give a person an excuse to buy many lottery tickets. This has caused a few people to lose all their money and cause them a poor life. The lottery could also cause stealing. Someone who is poor may

try and steal lottery tickets so they might win money.

Comparing the disadvantages to the advantages it is clearly able for anyone to see that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. Putting a student through college is much more important than having a few people make a bad decision and lose all their money. Even though its gambling people should be able to make their own best judgement while benefiting college scholarships. In conclusion I believe that lotteries should be used in states to help benefit good programs like the Hope Scholarship.

Austin wrote neatly in paragraph form and composed four paragraphs. He delicately put a line through a couple of edited words, which did not distract the reader. His introduction presented a

counterargument and ended with a thesis statement on the issue. One of the important issues he discussed in his first body paragraph is the use of lottery funds for HOPE scholarships, which are very popular in our state—the scholarships motivate high school and college students to work hard and keep a B average. I believe that showing knowledge of this specific issue contributed to Austin's score. In the second body paragraph, he stated the disadvantages of the state lottery, such as gambling and stealing, and he ended his essay by restating his position on the issue. This essay has a few grammatical errors, but when it comes to content, sentence structure, and vocabulary, it is of average quality.

The final writing sample is an essay by a student named Jim. This essay was assessed as exceeding the standards:

Gambling has been a controversial issue in our society for quite some time. Many people believe that gambling is a sin, goes against their religion, or is just another waste of money and time. As one would expect, these people immediately object to the idea of using lotteries, the quintessence of corruption, to fund any organization. What these people do not realize, however, is that lotteries may be the key to saving the future of education.

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Since their creation centuries ago, schools have had to deal with the difficult task of raising money. Taxes have been raised and fundraisers have been developed, yet the lack of money our schools have only seems to grow. As a student, I have attended many schools throughout Georgia and experienced firsthand the worsening condition that the schools have fallen into. Gymnasiums are rickety, short on decent sports equipment, sweating on worn out teacher desks and deflated basketballs. Bands can't afford new instruments for aspiring musicians and can only hope that new ones arrive with their own. Teachers, rather than having a school budget to spend on supplies, must pay for necessities from their own pockets. Some teachers even go as far as requiring students to purchase their own books if they desire to maintain a good grade. In my opinion, this is completely unacceptable! With such a serious money problem on our hands, the relatively simple lottery idea could dramatically improve our schools.

Some of you out there may be asking yourselves "well surely there are other ways of supporting education?" To that I respond saying that lotteries may soon become the only way of supplying money for scholarships and other educational programs. Many families throughout Georgia dream of sending their children to college and rely on the better off citizens to assist by participating in fundraising activities.

Unfortunately, schools can only have so many bake sales before parents grow tired of buying the same old macarons. On that same note, council members can only raise taxes so much before the citizens that pay them start to revolt. Lotteries, however, never seem to grow old. The prospect of winning an immense amount of money greatly outweighs the need for better goods and completely overshadows the need for and anger that comes with tax raising. Thus, lotteries provide schools and scholarship programs with money, citizens are having fun playing with the lottery and the idea of instantaneously becoming rich and great is harmful. It's a situation where everyone wins.

In conclusion, although lotteries may not be the most righteous or just way of funding education, it certainly gets the job done faster than other sources of income and may be responsible for bettering not only the education, but the future of America.

When I read Jim’s essay, right away I noticed his use of more sophisticated vocabulary than the previous writers. His first paragraph is rich in specifics (taxes, fundraisers, reality of schools’ needs) as well as personal experiences, which qualifies his argument as credible and marks him as a mature thinker. The same goes for the second body paragraph. It is rich with information (the need for scholarships and raising money), and the reader can detect his sense of humor (“bake sales”) and even sarcasm (“same old macaroons”). As the teacher who worked with Jim for a whole year, that put a smile on my face (it reminded me right away of our class reading of *A Doll’s House*, with Nora and her macaroons). Jim ended his essay quickly, but he stated his ideas adequately. I believe his tone, sense of humor, and acknowledgment of reality, as well as his proper grammar and rich vocabulary, contributed to his “exceeds the standards” assessment. He is a unique young man whose quiet confidence and striving for originality will undoubtedly help him transition more easily than Angie or Austin does to college-level writing.

Conclusion

Over the following two years in high school, this group of tenth graders will go through many more testing tasks besides the Preliminary Writing Assessment Test. Each one of them will have to pass the Georgia High School Graduation Test because, without a passing score on that test, their education comes to a halt: They will not be able to enter any higher education institution such as a technical school, college, or university—not even a military school. That is why each student goes through all this preparation and testing.

The results for our school as a whole predicted that 88 percent of our tenth graders will pass the graduation test they take in eleventh grade. Those results enabled us, the English teachers, to help students who need remediation in order to pass the test. Most of the students

who need remediation are in our Remedial Educational Program (REP) and ESOL classes. The eleventh-grade teachers of these students provide instruction in persuasive writing at the beginning of the school year to make sure that students are ready for the graduation test in the fall. Eleventh-grade English instructors also teach the research paper at the beginning of the school year. This instruction helps students develop the writing skills that will enable them to pass the graduation test and compose a documented, MLA-style, research essay. (The results for the year's eleventh-grade graduation test showed that 99 percent passed the test. It is comforting to know that, in general, we as a school are serving our students well.)

When it comes to testing in general, most of the teachers, students, and parents believe that students are simply overtested and that oftentimes the preparation for the various tests takes class time from other activities. However, testing is part of our reality, and we as educators have to do our very best to prepare students for these tests. For example, our school calendar in May is filled with tests, almost on daily basis: AP tests in most of the academic subjects, the EOCT for tenth and eleventh graders, senior project presentations, and finals.

Many teachers are overwhelmed with the responsibility of teaching the curriculum as well as the assessment tests. So, sections of the regular curriculum sometimes are abandoned for the sake of preparing for the statewide tests. When I taught ninth grade, I provided several practices for the EOCT, which took time away from the study of literature, grammar, and writing to make sure that students were prepared for the test. Even though the EOCT is just a basic literacy test, it is worrisome and time consuming. Now, not having the burden of preparing my tenth graders for the EOCT, I can provide them with practice for both the PSAT and the PWAT. Likewise, I can offer creative assignments and projects that enable students to immerse

themselves in different types of literature and develop the knowledge and skills they need for the AP Literature exam in their senior year.

Our main goal, of course, with all of these testing tasks and other classroom activities, is to prepare students for college. That is why we provide a variety of learning opportunities for students to develop their writing skills. However, just like the students coming from elementary schools to middle schools and then on to high school, maturity is an important aspect when it comes to accumulating knowledge and applying it in a new environment. Recently, our vertical team met with the middle school language art teachers. I was very pleased when I saw the instructions on the whiteboard about persuasive writing because I was just finishing my persuasive unit with my high school students. Through our discussion, I realized that, besides persuasive writing, the middle school teachers also cover MLA style and other important aspects that I emphasize in my teaching at the high school level. I expressed my appreciation of the skills that they were teaching in their classrooms and commented that I nonetheless often had to re-teach everything in my classroom. They made the same observation that I usually make when I come across a student who has been in my senior classroom in the spring and then in my freshman college classroom in the fall at Kennesaw State University: Student maturity is what makes all the difference in teaching. The middle school teachers commented that, in their earlier meeting with elementary school teachers, they had discussed the issue of maturity because teachers usually cover material to prepare students for the next grade. However, some of the skills have to be taught the next year in order to build on them.

One of the most memorable examples concerning maturity is my experience with a student from my tenth-grade class several years ago. He was an intelligent young man who did not apply himself much in the classroom, but he did enjoy socializing with his peers during class

time. Many times, I had to give him detention or send him out of the classroom for disruption. In his junior and senior years, I often saw him often sitting in the hall—having been thrown out of the classroom for talking. When he was a first-year student at Kennesaw, he happened to take my English 1101 class, but he was not the same young man I had known only a couple of months before, in high school. He conducted himself in a very mature, gentlemanly way in my college classroom. He had a job and was paying for his schooling. Now that he was a part of the real world, he wanted to make a difference in his life by obtaining a college degree.

From this experience and a few others, I've seen that, during the summer after high school graduation, kids often realize the importance of education because they know that they do not have to go to college if they do not want to. They also understand that if they have scholarships or loans or if their parents are supporting them, they have to justify the expenses with a passing grade. Nevertheless, this does not mean that they remember how to apply what they were exposed to in high school, but it does mean that, in general, they are willing learners who show more interest in their work and care more about their grades. Therefore, we often have to re-teach some of the skills and build on them so that college students have the knowledge and abilities to produce strong academic papers.

The past twenty years of teaching all levels of high school English, as well as college-level composition classes, have enabled me to understand how students learn, and I try to tailor my instruction so that students can achieve success in their daily tasks. It is rewarding when students are successful and when they see me not only as their instructor but also as a fellow learner—because I share myself with them on all levels: When they write, I write; when they share, I share; and we bond not only on professional level but a personal level, too, which benefits all of us.

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Editor’s note: Because of budget cuts taking effect in 2010, Mosley’s high school no longer offers the Preliminary Writing Assessment Test to tenth graders. Nonetheless, the school continues to teach the persuasive essay to their tenth-grade students to prepare them for the graduation test.

Milka Mosley, a native of the Republic of Macedonia, has worked as a full-time high school English teacher for the Cherokee County School System in Georgia for the past twenty years. She also works as a part-time English teacher at Kennesaw State University in Kennesaw, Georgia, where she teaches composition. She has a great love and enthusiasm for her subject matter and tries to inspire her students to create their best

writing on a daily basis. Her previous essay, "The Truth about High School English," was published in *What Is "College-Level" Writing?* (NCTE 2006).