

## *Reading and Writing Assessment at STCC*

Most entering students at Springfield Technical Community College participate in an assessment of writing and reading skills as part of the college's placement testing program. Special exemptions are granted for non-degree students, students who transfer credits earned in a college level English composition course at another school; and students who request placement in the English as a Second Language program. For all other students, assessment results are vital for academic planning, especially in the first semester of a student's course of study.

### *Writing Assessment*

English writing assessment is a two-stage process. The first step is the sixty-item English Placement Test or EPT. It is an objective test of English grammar, syntax (sentence structure), and mechanics (spelling and punctuation). Most students take the EPT at a computer, although a paper and pencil version is available for special circumstances. The EPT is a multiple-choice exam that measures a test-taker's ability to identify errors in standard, formal English. Each test item has four potential errors labeled in an item plus a *no error* option. Two sample items follow:

The softball coach said her shortstop, Ann McKee, has been hitting good in the four games. No error

a                      b                      c                      d  
e

The correct choice would be **d** as the adjective *good* is ungrammatical in this sentence. The right word to use in this context would be the adverb *well*.

I use to go to a private college, but it charged much higher tuition than the state university I currently attend. No error

a                      b                      c  
d                      e

You would select **a** because the verb *use* is incorrect. The right verb would be the past tense *used*.

Once students finish the English Placement Test they are given scores between 1 and 60 to indicate the number of items identified correctly. Students who score above a 38 are assigned to English Composition I (ENGL 100) as their first English course and those who score below a 25 are enrolled in Review for College Writing (DWRT 099). Test-takers whose results lie between those points, about half of all students, proceed to the second stage of English assessment – the English Placement Essay. The placement essay is an impromptu writing sample written in response to a topic that the writer selects from a short list of prompts. Here is an example of such a prompt.

***What is the most memorable or significant book you have read in the last year? Identify the specific qualities of the book and explain why they affected you. Don't simply retell the story; rather focus on the impact that the book had upon your own mind and heart.***

Students are offered a maximum of ninety minutes to plan, draft, and edit a brief, two to three page essay, although most writers finish the task in about fifty minutes. Completed essays are evaluated by two members of the English faculty who judge the essays according to the following standard or rubric:

*This writing sample shows an understanding of basic essay structure. The writer knows how to present and develop a central idea in response to one of the assigned topics. The supporting ideas have been organized in a clear attempt to produce logical paragraphs. Although individual paragraphs may not be fully developed, the writer has included some specific details and observations to amplify general statements. Most sentences in the sample are clearly written. While there may be some errors in sentence structure, standard English grammar, punctuation, and spelling, these errors are occasional rather than persistent.*

A writer whose sample essay achieves this standard will be assigned to English Composition I as his or her first English course. All others will be assigned to the developmental writing course, Review for College Writing, as the initial class.

### ***Reading Assessment***

STCC uses the Accuplacer Reading Test to evaluate the reading skills of entering students. Results on this test determine whether or not a student will be required to take a reading class at the college, and if so, at which level. The Accuplacer test is an adaptive test of reading comprehension given at a computer terminal. Adaptive means that the program automatically selects appropriate questions for you based on your responses to previous questions. Because the test reacts to you, it can assess your reading skills with fewer questions than other tests, in this case about twenty items. Here are examples of the two ways in which the reading test presents questions:

Some questions will ask you to read a statement or passage and then choose the best answer to the question. You will answer according to what is stated or implied in the passage.

*There are two types of pottery that I do. There is production pottery - - mugs, tableware - -the kinds of things that sell easily. These pay for my time to do the other work, which is more creative and satisfies my needs as an artist.*

The author of this passage implies that

- A. artists have a tendency to waste valuable time
- B. creativity and mass-production are incompatible\*
- C. most people do not appreciate good art
- D. pottery is not produced by creative artists

The correct answer is B. - **creativity and mass-production are not compatible.**

Other questions will give you two underlined sentences followed by a question or statement. Read the sentences, before choosing the best answer or best completion of the statement.

*The Midwest is experiencing the worst drought in fifteen years.*

*Corn and soybean prices are expected to be very high this year.*

What does the second sentence do?

- A. It restates the idea found in the first.
- B. It states an effect.\*
- C. It gives an example.
- D. It analyzes the statement made in the first.

**The correct answer is B – it states an effect.**

A college-level score on the reading test will be designated READING 105. Students who place at that level do not need to take a reading course at STCC. Scores of DRDG 091 or DRDG 092 indicate that you will benefit from a college reading course and you will be required to take those classes to move forward in your degree program.

### ***Preparing for the English and Reading Assessments***

Habits of careful, critical reading and practice in clear, correct writing acquired over years of schooling are the best preparation for these tests. However, there are some more immediate things you can do to help you to perform your best on the writing and reading assessment tests.

1. If the rules of writing aren't fresh for you, find a review book, preferably one with practice exercises, that explains correct grammar, sentence structure and punctuation. Once you understand subject-verb agreement, know when to use an object pronoun, can distinguish a sentence fragment from a complete sentence, and know when to use *there*, *their*, or *they're*, you'll do well on the English Placement Test. Books like **The Least You Need to Know about English – Writing Skills** (Wilson & Glazier, Wadsworth Publishing Co. 2007) or any other basic college English book will help you greatly.

2. As there's a good chance you will be writing an essay as part of English assessment, you should get in shape for it. Writing is a skill, and like many other skills it needs practice. If you haven't written much more than a shopping list recently or if you feel uncertain about what essays are and how to write them, give yourself some practice. Consult a review text for hints about essay writing and then try writing a five or six paragraph essay to express and support a position. Here's a topic you can practice with:

***Commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq have stretched the ability of the U. S. military to do its work and not enough new recruits are entering the military to fill the positions of those soldiers, sailors, marines and air force personnel who will soon retire. Should the United States reinstitute a draft to fill staffing needs? Yes or No? If your answer is no what other solution can you offer?***

3. As an Accuplacer Reading Test doesn't test for vocabulary words (in isolation, anyway) you should steer away from wordlists and focus on practice materials that give you passages to read and comprehension questions to answer. Any of the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) review materials will be useful in this regard, but the best help you can give yourself is to get into the practice of reading every day and thinking carefully about what you read.

4. Simple test-taking strategies always help in producing test performances that show your full abilities. Getting a good night's sleep before the assessments, taking your time to read and understand the directions, skimming the answer choices before reading the question, eliminating obviously wrong answers, thinking carefully about the answers you choose and why you've chosen them, etc. contribute to good test performances. You should also be aware of the rules about time and guessing. The English Placement Test and the Accuplacer Reading Test are both untimed. Neither of the tests penalizes wrong answers so make your best educated guess. The English placement essay does carry a firm ninety minute time limit, but most writers find they don't need that much time to write a satisfactory essay.