



Q. How does the Essay Component of WriteToLearn™ work?

A. WriteToLearn is trained to score based on hundreds of student essays that have been graded by professional human scorers. Using a technique that evaluates the meaning of text, the computer compares the content and relevant qualities of writing of each of the student responses, along with the scores given to the responses by the human scorers. From these comparisons, it derives a prompt-specific algorithm to predict the scores that the same human scorers would assign to new responses.

In short, WriteToLearn measures the quality of essays by determining:

- The language features that human scorers evaluate when scoring a response
- How those features are weighed and combined to produce a score

Q: How does WriteToLearn recognize a good essay?

A: WriteToLearn assesses the content of an essay, as well as more mechanical aspects of writing. When a student submits an essay for scoring, the system immediately measures the meaning of the essay. It then compares the essay to the training essays, looking for similarities, and assigns a score in part by placing the essay in a category with the most similar training essays. Each trait is scored independently in this way. WriteToLearn assesses each trait in the student essay, compares it to the training essays, and then categorizes the trait in question.

Q: How does WriteToLearn's scoring compare to the way teachers grade writing?

A: WriteToLearn's approach mirrors the way that teachers grade essays. For example, when teachers evaluate a student's essay, they look for characteristics that identify an essay as an A, B, or C paper. Their expectations are likely based on their previous experience as a grader and on criteria for the assignment in question. In other words, teachers search for a match between the essay itself and the criteria for a particular grade or score. WriteToLearn is trained to mimic this process.

Q. My students seem to be getting higher scores when they write online versus when they write on paper. Why?

A. Students are often better able to craft their responses online. There are many possible reasons for this. First, as digital natives, they are more comfortable typing than they are writing. Second, revising drafts and moving text around is often easier when composing online. Third, the feedback they receive from WriteToLearn helps them to revise and improve their drafts.

Q. WriteToLearn is scoring lower or higher than I would. What can I do?

A. The Settings Tool allows you to adjust the passing threshold for each trait for a given activity. The default passing threshold is 4 on a 6-point scale. If you feel that WriteToLearn is scoring too leniently on one or more traits, you can increase the passing threshold for those traits. If you feel that it is scoring too harshly, you can decrease the passing threshold. You can also adjust the passing threshold for the overall score higher or lower.

WriteToLearn includes essay writing activities for students in grades 4-12. Each prompt is individually trained based on student responses at the given grade level. To make activities more challenging for their students, teachers can also assign activities from higher grade levels. Or they can assign activities from lower grader levels to make them less challenging.

Q: How does WriteToLearn assign an overall score?

A: The overall score is computed by averaging the individual trait scores. The traits are scored on a 6-point scale. For the overall score, WriteToLearn can assign a 4- or 6-point score. In the case of a 4- point overall score, the average trait score is scaled. Teachers can use the Settings Tool to change the overall score range from its default value.

Q. My student made a minor change and his/her score changed. Why?

WriteToLearn computes a continuous score, such as 3.46, for each essay. That score is then transformed into a categorical score, such as 3, that is presented to the student. A minor change in an essay may move the continuous score just above or below the cut point for a given categorical score and so can result in a change in score.

Q. How is the Conventions score related to the grammar feedback?

A. The Conventions score is computed in the same way as the other trait scores. WriteToLearn evaluates a student's essay by comparing it to the training essays that were scored for Conventions by professional human scorers. The grammar feedback is determined independently to give students feedback on particular grammar errors in their writing.

Q. Why is WriteToLearn not catching some of my students' grammar errors?

A. WriteToLearn is conservative in its approach to reporting grammar errors so as not to give false positives and tell students that something is an error when it is not. While adults are very good at taking feedback returned from programs such as Microsoft Word® and ignoring incorrect reports of grammar errors, students are still in the process of gathering the experience and knowledge to make such decisions. As a result, WriteToLearn errs on the side of caution in flagging grammar errors so as not to confuse or misteach students.

Pearson is always working to improve WriteToLearn's grammar checking capabilities and provide additional feedback. A beta version will be available shortly with a new release planned for Fall 2010.

Q. What can I do about the grammar errors that WriteToLearn misses?

A. The comment feature allows teachers to make personalized comments on their students' writing including flagging particular grammar errors for correction.

Q: Why wasn't my student's essay scored?

A: Before scoring a response, WriteToLearn first evaluates the accuracy with which it can do so. If WriteToLearn is not confident that it can return an accurate score, it will instead return a message suggesting that the student review the essay with his or her teacher. This can happen for a variety of reasons. First, the essay may be too short to evaluate the skill level of the student. Second, it may be much longer than expected for an essay. Third, it may not be as expected based on WriteToLearn's experience.

WriteToLearn is trained on hundreds of student essays written by students at the grade level specified for the given prompt. Based on these essays, WriteToLearn has certain expectations about the content, style, and skill level of the writing. If a new essay does not meet these expectations, then WriteToLearn will not be confident enough in its ability to score the essay accurately to return a score. The reasons for this include:

- The essay may be off-topic or it may be highly creative.
- The essay may not be a good faith essay. For example, it may be a refusal to write.
- The essay may demonstrate a skill level that is very different from the expected skill level. For example, this can happen when a 6th grade student is asked to respond to a 12th grade prompt and vice versa.
- The essay may be in all capital letters and thus not demonstrate appropriate formal writing style.
- The essay may include too much repeated content, such as copying and pasting the same paragraph over and over.
- The essay may not look like an essay. For example, it may be just a list of words or contain little to no punctuation.

Q. How is the Conventions score related to the spelling feedback?

A. Spelling is a factor in evaluating Conventions. The Conventions score is computed in the same way as the other trait scores. WriteToLearn evaluates a student's essay by comparing it to the training essays that were scored for Conventions by professional human scorers. The spelling feedback is determined independently to give students feedback on particular spelling errors in their writing.

The Overall score is the average of the trait scores and so is influenced by the Conventions score, but the spelling editing tool feedback is independent.

When the student ignores a spelling error, such as for a proper noun, the spell checker will no longer report it as an error. Since the Conventions score is computed independently of the spell checker, it is possible that the word will still have an effect on the Conventions score, but the decrease would be expected to be minimal.

Errors found by the spell checker can influence whether the student is viewed as totally passing the activity (i.e. they get the Congratulations! message) or not.