

# 2021 MCAS Sample Student Work and Scoring Guide

## Grade 8 English Language Arts

### Question 12: Essay

**Reporting Categories:** Language and Writing

**Standard:** L.PK-12.1 - Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

**Standard:** L.PK-12.2 - Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

**Standard:** L.PK-12.3 - Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

**Standard:** W.PK-12.1 - Write arguments (e.g., essays, letters to the editor, advocacy speeches) to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.

**Standard:** W.PK-12.4 - Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

**Item Description:** Write an argument in the form of a letter in support of an idea presented in two passages; support the argument with details from the passages.

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### Essay Prompt

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For this question, you will write an essay based on the passage(s). Your writing should:

- Present and develop a central idea.
- Provide evidence and/or details from the passage(s).
- Use correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

Based on “The Green Belt Movement” and “Wangari Maathai’s Nobel Lecture,” write a letter to your local government in which you argue that an organization like the Green Belt Movement should be started in your area. Be sure to use details from **both** the article and the lecture to develop your letter.

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*Continue to the following page to see the scoring guides for this question. Sample student responses begin on page 3. The annotations that appear above each sample response describe elements of the response that contributed to its score for Idea Development and Standard English Conventions.*

### Scoring Guide for Idea Development

Select a score point in the table below to view the sample student response.

Score*	Description
<a href="#">5A</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Central idea is insightful and fully developed</li> <li>Skillful selection and explanation of evidence and/or details</li> <li>Skillful and/or subtle organization</li> <li>Rich expression of ideas</li> <li>Full awareness of the task and mode</li> </ul>
<a href="#">5B</a>	
<a href="#">4</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Central idea is clear and well-developed</li> <li>Effective selection and explanation of evidence and/or details</li> <li>Effective organization</li> <li>Clear expression of ideas</li> <li>Full awareness of the task and mode</li> </ul>
<a href="#">3</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Central idea is general and moderately developed</li> <li>Appropriate selection and explanation of evidence and/or details</li> <li>Moderate organization</li> <li>Adequate expression of ideas</li> <li>Sufficient awareness of the task and mode</li> </ul>
<a href="#">2</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Central idea may be present and is somewhat developed</li> <li>Limited selection and explanation of evidence and/or details</li> <li>Limited organization</li> <li>Basic expression of ideas</li> <li>Partial awareness of the task and mode</li> </ul>
<a href="#">1</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Central idea is not developed</li> <li>Insufficient evidence and/or details</li> <li>Minimal organization</li> <li>Poor expression of ideas</li> <li>Minimal awareness of the task and mode</li> </ul>
<a href="#">0</a>	The response shows evidence the student has read the text, but does not address the question or incorrectly responds to the question.

### Scoring Guide for Standard English Conventions

Select a score point in the table below to view the sample student response.

Score*	Description
<a href="#">3A</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consistent control of a variety of sentence structures relative to length of essay</li> <li>Consistent control of grammar, usage, and mechanics relative to complexity and/or length of essay</li> </ul>
<a href="#">3B</a>	
<a href="#">3C</a>	
<a href="#">3D</a>	
<a href="#">2</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mostly consistent control of sentence structures relative to length of essay</li> <li>Mostly consistent control of grammar, usage, and mechanics relative to complexity and/or length of essay</li> </ul>
<a href="#">1</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Little control and/or no variety in sentence structure and/or</li> <li>Little control of grammar, usage, and mechanics relative to complexity and/or insufficient length</li> </ul>
<a href="#">0</a>	Sentences are formed incorrectly with no control of grammar, usage, and mechanics and/or insufficient length.

\*In both Scoring Guides, letters are used to distinguish between sample student responses that earned the same score (e.g., 5A and 5B).

**Idea Development—Score Point 5A**

The letter to a local government presents a strong argument in favor of supporting a cause like the Green Belt Movement. The central idea is fully developed and supported with details from both the article and the lecture. The letter's introduction grabs the reader's attention with an urgent statement about the current state of the environment: "The environment is degrading all across the world and is in desperate need of a collaborative effort." Then, the impact of the Green Belt Movement is established: "This was arguably one of the strongest efforts to repair environmental damage in Africa." The four-paragraph letter is organized by passage, with one body paragraph devoted to each text, and details are selected from both texts to form a coherent argument. The first body paragraph develops details from the article, emphasizing that the Green Belt Movement has had benefits beyond improving the natural environment: "Growing a tree has helped Maathai gain self-confidence and hope, so if such a movement [were] implemented in Massachusetts, not only would it be beneficial for the community's environment, but it would similarly bring joy to the people who plant [trees]." The second body paragraph presents ideas from Maathai's lecture, further developing the point that the movement can have broad effects because "it was helpful environmentally with soils and watersheds, but also economically." Overall, the argument supports the idea that environmental stewardship can improve quality of life while strengthening the sense of self-worth of individual citizens. The final paragraph concludes the argument by emphasizing Maathai's character: she established a movement that "encouraged people to grow trees, despite efforts to intimidate her." The writing shows a clear sense of purpose and a strong awareness of the task and argument mode of writing.

**Standard English Conventions—Score Point 3A**

The letter shows consistent control of a variety of sentence structures in fully developed writing. Although there is some awkwardness in word choice, complex sentence structures support a clear progression of ideas: "Both pieces of text support that the Green Belt Movement, a campaign to grow trees, encouraged people to grow trees, despite efforts to intimidate [Mathaai]." Control of grammar, usage, and mechanics supports clarity.

Dear,  
Massachusetts State Government,

The environment is degrading all across the world and is in desperate need of a collaborative effort and movement to save the environment. Wangari Maathai is an extremely influential woman, as proven in the article, "The Green Belt Movement" by Mia MacDonald, and the excerpt, "Wangari Maathai's Nobel Lecture" by Wangari Maathai, with her establishment of the Green Belt Movement. According to the both pieces of text, The Green Belt Movement led campaigns to grow trees, in an effort to save Kenya's forests. This was arguably one of the strongest efforts to repair environmental damage in Africa. Reading both pieces of text, I can strongly say that I would support a movement like this in the state of Massachussets to contribute to saving the environment.

The article, "The Green Belt Movement" is the first piece of text that serves evidence for why The Green Belt movement would greatly help the environment in the state of Massachusetts. MacDonald offers a compelling backstory for The Green Belt Movement's Wangari Maathai, while also detailing some of its achievements. MacDonald writes, "Her non-governmental Green Belt Movement has planed 30 million trees across in Kenya, many of which still stand. In 2004 her work was internationally recognized with the Noble Peace Prize." Growing a tree has helped Maathai gain self-confidence and hope, so if such a movement was implemented in Massachusetts, not only would it be beneficial for the

community's environment, but it would similarly bring joy to the people who plant them. MacDonald further supports this by including words of Maathai herself, who states, "If you understand and you are disturbed, then you are moved to action. That's exactly what's happened to me." Maathai argues that the worse the consequences if a certain problem isn't solved, the more determined people will be to solve that problem. According to MacDonald's article, the Green Belt Movement was created when Maathai understood the "environmental degradation and felt needs of the communities." MacDonald writes, "She hit on the idea of using trees to replenish the soil, provide fuel wood, protect watersheds and promote better nutrition (through growing fruit trees). This provides evidence that scientifically speaking, the Green Belt Movement will help the environment. In the article, MacDonald also mentions how the Green Belt movement has evolved over the years. She continues, "...the Green Belt movement has incorporated other community activities into tree-planting efforts." This clarifies that the Green Belt movement is much more than a tree-planting program, but a movement that is dedicated to saving the environment, proved by its promotion of other community activities.

The excerpt, "Wangari Maathai's Noble Lecture" by Wangari Maathai is the second piece of text that serves evidence for why The Green Belt movement would greatly help the environment in the state of Massachusetts. Maathai's speech is listed with several accomplishments of the Green Belt Movement in Africa, that would support why it should be implemented here in Massachusetts. Maathai speaks, "So, together, we have planted over 30 million trees that provide fuel, food, shelter and income to support their children's education and household needs ... activity also creates employment and improve soils and watersheds". Wangari serves another beneficial outcome of the Green Belt Movement, by mentioning the positive effects in education because of a greater source of food for families to access. She continues her explanation of the Green Belt Movement's positive impact by contending that it was helpful environmentally with soils and watersheds, but also economically, as the movement created more jobs for people. Wangari details further achievements and more importantly, her struggles against the government. These details bolster my claim that the Green Belt Movement should be implemented without any interference from the government, that Wangari had to confront.

The article, "The Green Belt Movement" by Mia MacDonald, and the excerpt, "Wangari Maathai's Nobel Lecture" by Wangari Maathai, display Maathai's amazing efforts to save the environment with her establishment of the Green Belt Movement. Both pieces of text support that the Green Belt Movement, a campaign to grow trees, encouraged people to grow trees, despite efforts to intimidate her. I write this letter because Maathai's passion for saving the environment is indicated in the Green Belt Movement, which has been one of the strongest efforts to repair environmental damage in Africa. Both pieces of text prove that The Green Belt Movement has contributed greatly to Africa, providing enough reasons that I would argue that it should be implemented in the environment of Massachusetts.

Sincerely,  
[student's name], [date]  
[name of city], Massachusetts



**Idea Development—Score Point 5B**

The four-paragraph letter begins with a bold statement about the condition of the environment and then introduces the argument that an environmental movement in one community can be expanded and extended to other communities to make a greater impact: "Similar to Wangari Maathai, . . . we could start small and possibly grow into something bigger." Having made this point, the writer introduces important details from both the article and the lecture, organizing them into body paragraphs by topic: benefits to the environment and benefits to people's quality of life. The first body paragraph contains the coherent argument that changes must be made to avert further environmental degradation: "Although changes in our area aren't as obvious or drastic yet, it's important to start before that." To illustrate this, the writer presents examples from the texts of poor environmental conditions in Kenya prior to the Green Belt Movement. The second body paragraph argues that those who participate in an environmental movement are likely to benefit personally as well: "[T]he work we could do would reach others, and inspire them to do the same. This would improve their quality of life because they would find something they're passionate about, and pursue it." Full awareness of the writing task is seen in the writer's expression of a central idea drawn from both the article and the lecture: "Just like Wangari Maathai, we can make a great change in our community, and also inspire others to do the same."

**Standard English Conventions—Score Point 3B**

The writing shows consistent control of a variety of sentence structures, grammar, usage, and mechanics in complex text. The skillful use of clauses demonstrated in numerous sentences helps ideas flow smoothly into each other; for example: "If they look back at the work they've done with the organization, they'll know they've done something meaningful to the world, no matter how small." Minor errors do not interfere with communication.

Dear local government,

[date]

The environment is in danger. There are so many ways we, as a community, could help save it. As a student at a local middle school, I believe we could make a difference in our community. Similar to Wangari Maathai, who started the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, which spread all over East and Central Africa, we could start small and possibly grow into something bigger. An organization like the Green Belt Movement should be started in our area because it would help the environment and improve our quality of life.

Starting an organization like the Green Belt Movement will help the environment, this is partly the whole point. The article titled "The Green Belt Movement: The Story of Wangari Maathai" talks about what sparked Maathai's interest for growing trees in the first place. "It was in the mid-1970s that Maathai became aware of Kenya's ecological decline: watersheds drying up, streams disappearing, and the desert expanding south from the Sahara". Although changes in our area aren't as obvious or drastic yet, it's important to start before that. Instead of waiting until the problem becomes very difficult to solve, we should start now. There is no doubt that planting trees, or doing something similar will help save the environment, so why not start as soon as possible? The paragraph in the article continues to state, "Vast forests had been cleared for farms or plantations of fast-growing exotic trees that drained the ecosystem of water and degraded the soil." Again, our changes aren't as drastic yet, so there is no reason to wait until they are. There is no time like the present to start making a difference. In an excerpt from Wangari Maathai's Nobel Peace Prize lecture in 2004, she explains the work of the Green Belt Movement, which began in 1977. Towards the end of the lecture, she says "Today, over 50 years later, the stream has dried up, women walk long distances for water, which is not always clean, and children will never know what they have lost." She founded the organization to bring Kenya one step closer to a better environment. This is exactly what we should do. Not only for ourselves, but for future generations. Change can start with

one person, just like Maathai. Our environment will become a better place if we start an organization like she did.

To add on, our quality of life could improve because of an organization like the Green Belt Movement. Back to the article titled "The Green Belt Movement", the writer also mentions a quote by Maathai. "As trees grow, they give you hope and self-confidence...You feel good, like you have transformed the landscape." People who want to participate in this organization might also feel this way. Like they found their purpose in life by saving the environment. It may also make them proud. If they look back at the work they've done with the organization, they'll know they've done something meaningful to the world, no matter how small. In Wangari Maathai's Nobel Peace Prize Lecture, she also talks about the impact the organization had on others. "Through the Green Belt Movement, thousands of ordinary citizens were mobilized and empowered to take action and effect change." This shows how if we start an organization, we might have the same impact. This would mean the work we could do would reach others, and inspire them to do the same. This would improve their quality of life because they would find something they're passionate about, and pursue it. In her lecture, she also states, "We are called to assist the Earth to heal her wounds and in the process heal our own--indeed, to embrace the whole creation in all its diversity, beauty and wonder." By saying this, we can infer she means that by repairing the environment, we are improving our own quality of life. It would make everyone feel better by knowing they're living in a safe, clean environment that is sticking around for a long time coming. They'll know that they're raising their kids in an area where they could raise future generations, improving their quality of life.

An organization like the Green Belt Movement would overall improve our community as a whole. Possibly encouraging others to be aware of the environment around them and what they can do to improve it. Please take this into great consideration. Just like Wangari Maathai, we can make a great change in our community, and also inspire others to do the same.

Thank you for your time,

[student's name]

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**Idea Development—Score Point 4**

The letter starts with a functional introduction that presents a clear and well-developed central idea: “Implementing an organization similar to the Green Belt Movement in our area would be good because it would make people more confident about effecting change, help heal the [environment], and create jobs.” The organization in this five-paragraph letter is formulaic, but details from both the article and the lecture are provided in the three body paragraphs to support the central idea. Positive effects of starting a movement similar to the Green Belt Movement are presented, with the first body paragraph focusing on the benefits to those who plant trees themselves: “Planting trees will become empowering for people and make them feel like they can make a change in their world.” The next two body paragraphs discuss the positive effects on the environment and on employment, respectively: “The jobs that are created would be ones to help improve the environment.” Less textual support is provided to support the argument than would be included in a higher-scoring essay, but the evidence that is used is well chosen. Overall, ideas are clearly expressed, and the writing demonstrates full awareness of the task and argument mode of writing.

**Standard English Conventions—Score Point 3C**

Sentence structures show some variety and are mostly correct. There is some awkwardness in spelling and usage, but these issues do not interfere with comprehension: “Planting trees is something that almost everyone can do and it will make people feel like they have the power to save the enviroment, which is something our planet need deperately.” The writing is sufficiently complex to show overall control of standard English conventions.

Dear Local Government,

Wangari Maathai is a woman from Kenya who started the Green Belt Movement to help the enviornment by planting trees. She won a Nobel Peace Prize for her work in planting more than 30 million trees. Her organization also helped spark change in the communities she lived in. Implementing an organization similar to the Green Belt Movement in our area would be good because it would make people more confident about effecting change, help heal the enviornment, and create jobs.

Planting trees would give people self confidence, and make them feel good about transforming the landscape. This can be seen when the Maathai says, "As trees grow, they give you hope and self-confidence,[...]You feel good, like you have transformed the landscape." (MacDonald 2). Planting trees will become empowering for people and make them feel like they can make a change in their world. Planting trees is something that almost everyone can do and it will make people feel like they have the power to save the enviroment, which is something our planet need deperately. Empowering people to influence change in our world will help raise moral and make people more confident in their abilities to make a difference. While helping plant trees will make people feel good, it will also make the earth feel good.

The health of the earth is deciling rapidly, but planting trees could help rebuild the environment. Maathai describes this when she says, "Today we are faced with a challenge that calls for a shift in our thinking. We are called to assist the Earth to heal her wounds and in the process heal our own--indeed, to embrace the whole creation in all it's diversity, beauty, and wonder." (Maathai 11). With the environment doing poorly, we are called to make a change in our way of living. Trees will help replenish the soil that we plant our crops in and will help the air we breath. Trees take in carbon dioxide, a gas that is toxic to humans in large amounts, a gas that we are producing in large quantities through manufacturing, and they emit oxygen, a gas that we need to breath. By planting trees more trees on our earth we would help clean up the atmosphere. Trees also produce fruit which could be used to

help our nutrition. Planting trees takes work, and people can be employed to do those jobs.

With the number of unemployed people in our country, new jobs are needed; planting trees is a job that would help the environment and our economy. The article tells of the impact the Green Belt Movement had on jobs when it said, "But in poor communities where unemployment was and still is rife,[...] options to earn money are few. Income from planting a tree is important,"(MacDonald 11). Employing people to plant trees would help with unemployment rates. Planting trees does not require much skill, so it would be a job available to almost everybody, anyone can do it. The jobs that are created would be ones to help improve the environment, so they would be completely worth spending money on.

Creating jobs, helping heal the environment, and making people confident about effecting change are things bringing an organization similar to the Green Belt Movement to our area could do.

Sincerely,

[student's name]

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**Idea Development—Score Point 3**

The first paragraph of the moderately developed letter includes a rhetorical question: “Look around you . . . Now imagine if all of that went away. It wouldn’t be as pretty . . . [,] would it.” Then the student states the central idea: “This is why I feel that we need an organization in our area like the Green Belt Movement.” The danger of losing the beauty of the natural environment leads to a discussion of some main points from the article and lecture: the involvement of citizens and the direct effects of the Green Belt Movement are argued to benefit both the environment and individuals alike, as “the movement has helped so many people already and it is only going to help more.” The second body paragraph discusses how a similar movement could benefit the student’s community: “The amount of good that these trees could do for our town would be wonderful.” Appropriate details are selected from the article and the lecture, but the arguments drawn from them are repetitive and expressed in overly general terms, merely summarizing major points. The conclusion adds only a brief statement of opinion; however, use of the argumentative tone throughout the letter demonstrates sufficient awareness of the task.

**Standard English Conventions—Score Point 3D**

The letter is brief but sufficiently developed to demonstrate control of standard English conventions. Sentence structures are correct, though they lack the complexity seen in more developed writing: “The amount of good that these trees could do for our town would be wonderful.” Some variety of structures is evident: “Also, having this organization would help to teach others about nature, trees, and the land around them.” Grammar, usage, and mechanics show an appropriate level of control, given the complexity of the writing.

Dear Local Government,

Look around you, look at the trees, the plants, the sky anything outside. Now imagine if all of that went away. It wouldn't be as pretty outside now would it. This is why I feel that we need an organization in our area like the Green Belt Movement.

The Green Belt Movement was created by Wangari Maathai, it is a nongovernmental project. It was created to help meet the basic needs of rural women in Kenya. They have planted over 30 million trees across Kenya. In the article "Wangari Maathai's Noble Lecture" Wangari talks about her work with the Green Belt Movement and what it has done for people. For example, the article states, "Through the Green Belt Movement thousands of ordinary citizens were mobilized and empowered to take action and effect change." This shows that the movement has helped so many people already and it is only going to help more.

Having a organization like this in our own backyard could be very helpful. The number of new trees that could be planted would be amazing. The amount of good that these trees could do for our town would be wonderful. In the article "The Green Belt Movement" by Mia MacDonald it talks about what the trees can do for the area once planted. To illustrate, the article says, "She hit on the idea of using trees to replenish soil, provide fuel wood, protect watershed and promote better nutrition (through growing fruit trees)." This explains that when the trees were planted there was so much you could do with them once they were all grown. Also, having this organization would help to teach others about nature, trees, and the land around them. To illustrate, the article "The Green Belt Movement" says, "The Network offers training and hands-on experience to grassroots environment and development groups." This demonstrates, that as the movement grew they had training sessions so that more people could learn about how to help.

In conclusion, I think there being an organization like The Green Belt Movement would be helpful in multiple ways. It could do so much good for the community and help so many people.

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**Idea Development—Score Point 2**

The letter presents a list of information, details from both texts, and some limited commentary. The Green Belt Movement is introduced as an organization that is “making a diff[e]rence in Africa,” and the letter goes on to suggest that the movement could be started in the writer’s community. A few basic facts about the broader effects of the movement are noted in the selection of details from the texts: “In an article that I read it states ‘As trees grow, they give hope and self-confidence.’” Overall, the writer’s ideas are clear but not developed. The letter shows a partial awareness of the task and mode of writing.

**Standard English Conventions—Score Point 2**

The letter is brief and not complex enough to demonstrate more than mostly consistent control of standard English conventions. Sentences show some variety in structure, though they tend to run on when greater complexity is attempted: “I was thinking we should have something like that here because it would help the enviornment of [name of city] also it would help young boys and girls like myself learn more about our beutiful world.” Spelling errors are noticeable but do not interfere with communication.

Dear City of [name of city]

I would like to talk to you about a group in kenya called The Green Belt Movement. They are a group of women that are making a diffrence in Africa. They are planting trees to help the enviornment. They are doing this because a women named Wangari Maathai who saw something in kenya that was wrong and changed it. I was thinking we should have something like that here because it would help the enviornment of [name of city] also it would help young boys and girls like myself learn more about our beutiful world. In an article that I read it states " As trees grow, they give hope and self-confidence, Mathai said recently. You feel good, like you have transformed the landscape. So it should come to no surprise that within an hour of learning she had won the peace prize for her contribution to sustainable development, democracy, and peace, Maathai planted a tree. It was a nandi flame tree native to her home regiojn of Nyeri, Kenya, where Maathai was when she heard the news." (2) In this you can see that Maathai is making a diffrence and all she is doing is planting trees. So what I think is that you should set something up and have people plant trees in the green so that the enviornment of [name of city] is way better. Also I read Maathai's nobel lecture were she says " So together, we have planted over 30 million trees that provide fuel, food, shelter, and income to support theier childrens education and household needs. The activity also creates employment and improves soil and watershed." (1) In this quote Maathai is telling us all the benefits it has to people in Kenya. So just think the possabilitys it will give people her.

Sincerly,  
[student's name]

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**Idea Development—Score Point 1**

The minimal response does state a central idea: “This movement should be started in my area because it could create a good living structure for our community.” However, this statement is supported by a weak list of details drawn largely from prior knowledge rather than from the texts. For example, the writer says that trees ““give you hope,”” which is stated in the article, but the writer also maintains that trees “give us oxygen and they give us something to look at,” details that do not appear in either text. The presentation is in letter form but shows little awareness of the task and argument mode of writing.

**Standard English Conventions—Score Point 1**

The response is too brief to show more than little control of standard English conventions. Sentence structures lack variety, and grammatical and spelling errors stand out, as in the opening sentence: “the Green Belt Movement impact our community in a positie way.” The response demonstrates little control of grammar, usage, and mechanics.

Dear Local Government,

In our town I feel that the Green Belt Movement impact our community in a positie way. This movement should be started in my area because it could create a good living structure for our community. Maathai said, "As trees grow, they give you hope and self-confidence." (paragraph 2) She said this because the trees around you amke you feel better about yourself and about where you are living. The trees can impact a community greatly because they give us oxygen and they give us something to look at. Planting more trees would be good for our environment and for the animals living in thesen areas. Trees give many different animals homes and places to live. They rely on trees and other plants to gove them a place to live. I think that the Green Belt Movement should be started in my community.

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**Idea Development—Score Point 0**

The response shows some evidence that the student has read the texts, but it contains only a vague statement and does not correctly answer the question.

**Standard English Conventions—Score Point 0**

The single statement is insufficient to demonstrate control of sentence structure, grammar, usage, and mechanics.

I say for all the stories that you should never give up until your confidence reaches the independence.

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