

2023 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-12.2](#) - Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

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 essay explaining how a character's reactions to an event reveal his character; use information from the passage for support.

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Essay Prompt

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 Night Circus, write an essay that explains how Bailey's reactions to the circus throughout the passage reveal his character. Be sure to use information from the passage to develop your essay.

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
5A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Central idea is insightful and fully developed Skillful selection and explanation of evidence and/or details Skillful and/or subtle organization Rich expression of ideas Full awareness of the task and mode
5B	
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Central idea is clear and well-developed Effective selection and explanation of evidence and/or details Effective organization Clear expression of ideas Full awareness of the task and mode
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Central idea is general and moderately developed Appropriate selection and explanation of evidence and/or details Moderate organization Adequate expression of ideas Sufficient awareness of the task and mode
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Central idea may be present and is somewhat developed Limited selection and explanation of evidence and/or details Limited organization Basic expression of ideas Partial awareness of the task and mode
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Central idea is not developed Insufficient evidence and/or details Minimal organization Poor expression of ideas Minimal awareness of the task and mode
0	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
3A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consistent control of a variety of sentence structures relative to length of essay Consistent control of grammar, usage, and mechanics relative to complexity and/or length of essay
3B	
3C	
3D	
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mostly consistent control of sentence structures relative to length of essay Mostly consistent control of grammar, usage, and mechanics relative to complexity and/or length of essay
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Little control and/or no variety in sentence structure and/or Little control of grammar, usage, and mechanics relative to complexity and/or insufficient length
0	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 essay is fully developed and insightful. The brief introduction provides an outline for analysis. Bailey’s reactions to the circus are developed in the body paragraphs and his characteristics are revealed through a skillful selection of evidence from the passage. The essay details how he is “eager and curious” about the circus, and his first visit brings a realization that contributes to a stronger fascination: “Bailey thought that the circus was going to be an event that he could view from afar and be amazed, but instead the circus invited him to adventure into its contents.” The essay further describes how Bailey’s curiosity leads him to trespass—a course he did not resist as “he would be angry at himself in the future” if he had not explored the circus further. The essay stresses that curiosity is part of the character’s personality: “He keeps pushing forward, although he knows that his actions are not correct due to his eagerness.” Eagerness and curiosity are counterpoints to other traits described in the essay. Bailey is described as hesitant as he explores the circus: “Bailey does not make a quick decision, but ponders first about the rep[er]cussions of his next actions and thinks to himself about what he should do.” The essay shows that he is passive, as well, in the sense that he is obedient: “Bailey follows the orders that he is given and accepts the rules that he is set throughout the novel.” Ideas are well organized and support understanding of the character’s complexity. The essay demonstrates full awareness of the writing task.

Standard English Conventions—Score Point 3A

The essay demonstrates consistent control of a variety of sentence forms: “Throughout the passage from the novel, Bailey is confirmed as being eager and curious. Bailey dreamed of being allowed to visit the circus as a child, but was not allowed to go due to being too young.” Consistent control of grammar, usage, and mechanics support an overall quality of coherence and clarity of ideas.

Reactions are caused by interacting with something and responding to it. In the fantasy novel *The Night Circus* by Erin Morgenstern, the main character Bailey's character is revealed throughout the passage. Bailey's character is revealed as being eager, hesitant, and obedient.

Throughout the passage from the novel, Bailey is confirmed as being eager and curious. Bailey dreamed of being allowed to visit the circus as a child, but was not allowed to go due to being too young. Years later, the travelling circus returns and Bailey visits the long-awaited circus for the first time. Bailey gazes at the festival's appearance and thinks, "He had expected it to be a show. Something to sit in a chair and watch. He realized quickly how wrong he was. It was something to be explored," (Morgenstern 8-10). Bailey thought that the circus was going to be an event that he could view from afar and be amazed, but instead the circus invited him to adventure into its contents. Bailey explores the tents and experiences almost everything that the circus had to offer him. Soon, he is dared to revisit the circus at dawn and his curiosity leads him to trespass through the gate. Bailey knew that if he did not investigate further, he would be angry at himself in the future, so he persisted on into the tents unlawfully. Bailey's curiosity is what leads him to keep exploring the circus and find out what lies inside of the old tents. He keeps pushing forward, although he knows that his actions are not correct due to his eagerness.

Not only is Bailey revealed to be eager and curious, he is also shown to be hesitant. The boy comes across a fence that is three times his current height and is faced with the task to return with evidence that he went inside the circus. Bailey figures out he can squeeze himself through the gap between the iron bars and decides, "He does hesitate, just for a moment, but he knows he will hate himself later if he doesn't at least try, no matter what might happen after," (Morgenstern 28). Bailey thinks to himself that he might regret in the future if he does not explore the circus now or else he might not get another chance. Bailey hesitates, but makes the decision to trespass and explore. Bailey does not make a quick decision, but ponders first about the repercussions of his next actions and thinks to himself about what he should do. After he enters the circus, he stops and wonders which way to go. He hesitates, but decides to go right at the end of a passage. He is revealed to be the opposite of a quick-thinker and takes a while before he ultimately goes right. A non-hesitant person would have gone a direction quickly without having to process all the possibilities that could happen. Bailey shows that he is hesitant over the course of the story progressing.

To add to his trait of being hesitant, Bailey is also revealed to be obedient. After visiting the circus at night, Bailey expressed that he would like to stay longer because there was more places that he could explore. Bailey is sent home, "Bailey would have stayed all night if his parents let him, there were still so many more tents to explore. But he was ushered home to bed after only a few hours, consoled with promises that he could go back the next weekend, though he anxiously recalls how quickly it disappeared before," (Morgenstern 16). Bailey wanted to keep adventuring into the circus, but he followed his parent's orders and went to bed. If Bailey was not obedient, he would have possibly ran off and kept going into the tents that the travelling circus offered. Bailey desired the chance to keep exploring, but was happy enough to follow the rules set for him by his mother and father. Also, when the girl in the white costume asks for him to follow her, he obliges and lets her lead the way with him right behind her. Instead of running off to somewhere else, he follows her out of the tent and back towards the fence. Bailey follows the orders that he is given and accepts the rules that he is set throughout the novel.

Overall, in *The Night Circus* by Erin Morgenstern, Bailey's character is revealed to be curious, hesitant, and obedient. Bailey shows his curiosity by adventuring into the tent when he is not supposed to and is hesitant when he slows down his thinking processes during his encounter with the gap in the fence. He is also shown to be obedient when he follows his parent's instructions to go to bed and return next weekend. Reactions to the circus cause Bailey to reveal his true personality and character.

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Idea Development—Score Point 5B

The fully developed essay begins with a summary of the passage and a description of Bailey’s reactions to the circus in the introductory paragraph. Bailey is described as “intrigued and fascinated” on his first visit to the circus and “in awe of the different tents and lights that surround him.” His character is revealed in the body paragraphs, where detailed accounts of experiences build a rich sense of his personality. The first body paragraph details how Bailey’s fascination led to “euphoric feelings,” and how curiosity and imagination piqued by the circus would “linger in his brain, not letting him forget how the circus made him feel.” Skillful organization is apparent in how the second body paragraph expands upon these ideas: “The circus was so influential to him that he could not resist seeing it again.” The essay further describes how Bailey’s “spontaneous ways” lead him to visit the circus during the day and risk the consequences of trespassing. Finally, Bailey is described as “childish” in seeking “spontaneous fun,” and his character is defined by imagination and curiosity that require him to act despite an understanding of the danger of acting. Details are carefully arranged to logically develop Bailey’s complex character, which is captured through a rich expression of ideas. The essay demonstrates full awareness of the task and mode.

Standard English Conventions—Score Point 3B

The long and complex essay demonstrates consistent control of a variety of sentence forms. Sentences convey clear ideas: “Even when Bailey has to leave the circus, he continues to think of his experience there and the impact it left on him,” and “From this, we learn that he is someone who seeks spontaneous fun.” Consistent control of grammar, usage, and mechanics supports coherent development of ideas.

Stories reveal characters' personalities and true motivations throughout the plot to create a more developed and interesting world. In *The Night Circus*, we meet the protagonist, Bailey, who is a boy curious about the circus that appears about every five years. He had last seen it when he was six years old, but his parents had not had allowed him to go because of his young age. Now that it has returned, he is intrigued and fascinated by the place more than ever. He goes to visit and is in awe of the different tents and lights that surround him, but his parents force him to leave much earlier than he actually desires. His friend, Caroline, dares him to go into the circus when it is closed and bring something back. When he is there, the circus seems almost deserted and he meets a girl who seems like one of the performers. She guides him back to the exit, and gives Bailey a glove for Caroline's dare. The mysterious girl runs back into the circus, and Bailey never sees her again. Bailey's reactions to the circus throughout the passage reveal his character in an expanded and fleshed-out way.

As Bailey makes his way through the circus, his curious side is shown as he walks through the tents in wonder. Bailey's expectations of the circus change instantly when he sees it for himself. When Bailey is first exploring the circus at night, the text states, "Everything was magical. And it seemed to go on forever. None of the pathways ended, they curved into others or circled back to the courtyard" (Morgenstern 14). Bailey's amazement of the place is highlighted by his perception. To him, it feels as if the circus loops around forever, with unending uniqueness in each tent. The quote illustrates his childish nature, and how entrancing each attraction is to him. He allows himself to be fully encapsulated in the park, and how his euphoric feelings are something he has never experienced before. Unfortunately, Bailey cannot stay at the circus forever, yet his feelings do not die down once he steps out. When Bailey has to leave the circus, the narrator says, "He could not properly describe it afterward. He could only nod when his mother asked if he had enjoyed himself" (Morgenstern 15). Bailey was so overwhelmed with the impact the circus left on him, he could not even express to his mother how his experience was. There were so many things he enjoyed, allowing us to see how imaginative he is and how his curiosity never stopped. He would have stayed as long as he could if it was not for his parents, proving his want to continue exploring the area. His imaginative feelings linger in his brain, not letting him forget how the circus made him feel.

Even when Bailey has to leave the circus, he continues to think of his experience there and the impact it left on him. The circus was so influential to him that he could not resist seeing it again. After Bailey leaves the circus, the narrator states, "...he anxiously recalls how quickly it disappeared before. He ached to go back almost the moment he walked away" (Morgenstern 16). Bailey does not feel as if he has finished exploring the circus, showcasing how unique each area was and how he never had a dull moment. As soon as he steps foot outside of the circus, he does not go back to his previous life, but continues to dwell on the eye-catching experience he had there. From this, we learn that he is someone who seeks spontaneous fun. If he had only himself to listen to, he would have stayed there until the circus closed. His spontaneous ways cause him to follow his heart and not his brain. When he returns to the circus during the day, he sneaks through the gates and the narrator states, "He does hesitate, just for a moment, but he knows he will hate himself later if he doesn't at least try, no matter what might happen after" (Morgenstern 28). Bailey's strong desire to continue exploring the circus allows us to see the impact it left on his mind. The circus was revolutionary for him, and he had never seen anything like it. He would much rather risk getting into trouble for trespassing than to restrict his desire to travel throughout the circus more. Bailey thinks on his feet, not evaluating the risk and having his mind set onto one goal. The circus was an all-new experience for Bailey, and he becomes heavily entranced by it.

Through Bailey's experiences in the circus, his reactions reveal his character and how his personality affects his experience. Bailey displays his curiosity and imagination as he walks through the circus in amazement, showcasing his childish personality. It leaves an feeling that does not disappear in him, causing him to go back to the circus only to explore once more. Although there may be many consequences when he continues to explore, he allows his desire to explore take over. The circus is one of the most influential moments of Bailey's life, as he has never seen anything like it before.

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Idea Development—Score Point 4

The central idea of the essay is clear and well-developed. Bailey’s complexity is seen in his different reactions to the circus. The essay describes the circus as a place of wonder at night, and “like a completely new world.” Bailey’s visit during the day reveals a “sad and remote” place, yet one that he feels compelled to explore. Effective organization stresses this contrast. A sense of wonder developed in the first body paragraph is set against a very different mood in the second body paragraph, where the circus is described as “a desolate, remote place as if nothing exciting had ever happened there in the first place.” The essay concludes that Bailey’s most prominent trait is curiosity, so “he wants to explore the place where he explored another world last night.” The essay successfully contrasts the settings of the circus at night and day to explain Bailey’s reactions and reveal his personality. The writing demonstrates full awareness of the task of the prompt and mode of writing.

Standard English Conventions—Score Point 3C

The essay demonstrates consistent control of standard English conventions. Sentence forms are varied and correct: “However, in paragraph 19, it shows that he doesn’t want to enter the circus now that is it day, but he has to because he accepted a dare. During the day, the tents look intimidating and not as welcoming.” Despite minor errors such as “is it day,” and “His feelings about the circus has changed,” there is consistent control in grammar, usage, and mechanics. The essay is sufficiently complex and there is no interference with communication.

Bailey thinks that the circus is an exciting and extraordinary place, but not as interesting in the day than at night. He is curious and wants to explore places that are interesting and appealing to him, but is disappointed when what he finds is underwhelming.

From paragraphs 8 to 16, he thinks that the circus would just be a show where he sits and watches it. He realizes that he is wrong and ends up watching many shows in a lot of different tents, and treats the circus like a completely new world. There is a lot of food that he thought was amazing and he couldn't describe it properly. The circus had many activities to see and participate in, and since there were so many, he didn't get the chance to stay even though he wanted to. His experience shows that he is amazed and curious about things that seem mysterious to him. It seemed like the circus was another world to explore and another place to be free in, even though he couldn't stay there forever, he definitely remembered all the experiences he had. He wanted to go back the moment he walked away. The best way to describe how he feels is that whatever expectation he had, it was too low. He realizes that he was missing out on a lot of fun activities when he was six years old. His parents tell him that he could go back next weekend, but he realizes how fast the circus disappeared last time and feels sad about it.

However, in paragraph 19, it shows that he doesn't want to enter the circus now that is it day, but he has to because he accepted a dare. During the day, the tents look intimidating and not as welcoming. Also, in paragraph 21, Bailey feels that the circus is strange in the daytime and too quiet without the sound of performances. It seems deserted and remote like nobody is there. His feelings about the circus has changed and now the circus feels like a desolate, remote place as if nothing exciting had ever happened there in the first place, so he doesn't want to enter it. Also, he is not sure if he wants to even do this anymore because he feels like he is going to be watched and the atmosphere is lonely. But even though the circus feels deserted and lonely, he still finds motivation to enter. In paragraph 25, he still feels curious about what is inside the circus. He doesn't want to do it because he has to do a dare, but because he wants to. This is because he wonders why it feels so empty now and where everyone has gone. So even though it feels sad and remote, he wants to explore the place where he explored another world last night.

Bailey is someone that always has an innate curiosity and will always want to find things to explore. Even if he is afraid that he might get caught for doing something wrong, if his motivation to discover certain things is strong enough then he is going to do it. He entered the circus because he wanted to find out things even when it was deserted.

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Idea Development—Score Point 3

The essay is moderately developed and organized. The introduction establishes the structure of the essay: “His emotions went from excited, to curious, to stunned.” Brief paragraphs build adequate expression. Bailey is described as “excited” and “amazed” by the circus. The essay notes how the author’s use of the adverb “even” in reference to the food shows that “along with the food, everything was amazing as well.” The essay further explains how Bailey’s curiosity is more important than his sister’s dare as he “now wants to go in not because of his sister, but because he decided that he wants to find out what the circus is like on the inside.” He is “stunned” when caught trespassing, and his fear is heightened by not knowing what “exsanguinated” means. The essay concludes with an explanation of how Bailey’s initial and final actions show his “innocence.” Details from the passage are appropriately selected, though the central idea is not well developed. Still, ideas are expressed adequately enough to reveal important aspects of Bailey’s personality. Overall, the essay demonstrates sufficient awareness of the task and mode.

Standard English Conventions—Score Point 3D

The essay is complex enough to show consistent control of standard English conventions. Sentence forms are varied and correct: “The emotions rushing through his head at the time caused him to lose his thought and go speechless for a few seconds.” Usage and spelling errors can be read through; for example, “This shows his excitement and amazement for the circus.” Incorrect use of a comma and a missing comma in the conclusion, as in “to execute the dare, made him realize” and “However when he got caught,” do not interfere with meaning in the sentences.

In this passage, Bailey's character gets revealed more and more as he moves through the circus. His emotions went from excited, to curious, to stunned.

At the beginning of the story, he is excited to go to the circus, after not being able to go because he is too young. When he first got here he was amazed with how different it all felt. In paragraph 13, Bailey says "Even the food was amazing." Having the word "even" in this sentence means that along with the food, everything was amazing as well. Then in paragraph 14 he proceeded to say "Everything was magical." This shows his excitement and amazement for the circus.

He shows his curiosity because he thought how this was a dare but, the more he thinks about it, he wants to go in because he is curious. In paragraph 25, the narrator mentions "Bailey finds that he does, actually want to go inside. Not just because of the dare but because he is curious. Dreadfully, hopelessly, curious." This shows that Bailey now wants to go in not because of his sister, but because he decided that he wants to find out what the circus is like on the inside.

Bailey then shows that he is stunned. In paragraph 37, Bailey says, "I... uh, I know." Bailey is nervous because he got caught. Early in the story, it mentioned how Bailey didn't know what exsanguinated meant. The emotions rushing through his head at the time caused him to lose his thought and go speechless for a few seconds.

Overall, these emotions show how Bailey reacted to the circus and how his character was revealed throughout the story. He had some sort of innocence towards the beginning, but later on he started to change. The pressure from Caroline to execute the dare, made him realize that he wasn't scared. However when he got caught doing something he wasn't supposed to do, the emotions rushing through his head began to reveal his innocence again.

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Idea Development—Score Point 2

The central idea of the essay is only somewhat developed. Ideas are organized in a basic three-part structure, addressing the beginning, middle, and end of the passage. Evidence and details are limited. The essay states that “Bailey was excited and amazed” by the circus. He is “nervous but curious” as he enters the circus, and “reli[e]ved and thankful” when he leaves the circus. The explanation focuses on Bailey’s reactions and does not provide more than a limited view of his character. The writing shows partial awareness of the task and mode.

Standard English Conventions—Score Point 2

The brief essay demonstrates mostly consistent control of standard English conventions. Most sentences are controlled, but forms are not significantly varied. Grammatical errors and awkwardness stand out in some run-on sentences: “Bailey was very nervous when he was in the circus so I bet he was very relieved that he got to found a way out.” A few spelling errors, such as “alrwady” and “relived,” do not interfere with communication.

In many ways, Bailey's reactions throughout the passage reveal his character. At the beginning of the story when he first saw the circus, Bailey was excited and amazed. Bailey was very excited when he saw everything in circus. On paraagraoh 7 it states " It was like nothing he had ever seen. The lights, the costumes, it was all so different. As though he had escape his everyday life and wandered into another world." This shows the wonders his mind was going throuh when he first saw the circus.

Toward the middle of the story when he was entering the circus after hours, Bailey felt pretty nervous but curious. He was wandering arounding in a new place and there were signs that had some questionable sayings on them. In paragraph 5 it states "...Not just because of the dare but because he is curious. dreadfull, hopelessly curious..." This shows how curious Bailey was even though he was still pretty nervous to enter.

At the end of the story, Bailey felt pretty relived and thankful that he got out of the circus. The girl that he meet in the ircus helped him out a lot. She found he a way out that was quickly and quietly and she also gave him her glove so he could prove that he did it. Bailey was very nervous when he was in the circus so I bet he was very relieved that he got to found a way out. On paragraph 56 it says "Thank you" he says again." This shows he thanking her for giving he the glove but the paragraph says "again" showing that he has alrwady said thank you to the girl for helping him out. Therefore, Bailey's reaction from excited and amazed to nervous and curious to finally relived and thankful shows how he revealed his character throughout the story.

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Idea Development—Score Point 1

The central idea of the essay is not developed. Details include insufficient support for the idea that Bailey’s reactions to the circus show “how much of a curious kid Bailey is.” The risk Bailey took to discover “many new things that he did not know about the circus before” is not explained. There is minimal awareness of the task and mode.

Standard English Conventions—Score Point 1

The essay lacks complexity and is too short to show more than little control of conventions. Spelling errors stand out in text that is brief and simple.

In the story "The Night Circus" by Erin Morgenstern, Bailey's reactions throughout the story reveal his character because they show how much of a curious kid Bailey is. In the beginning of the story Bailey wasn't allowed to go to the circus until a certain age. Once Bailey was old enough it was a great experience for Bailey. Then Bailey was forced to leave the circus even though he didn't want to. Bailey then took a risk and went to the circus and discovered many new things that he did not know about the circus before. This was a very interesting experience for Bailey and it revealed what a curious, smart kid Bailey is.

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Idea Development—Score Point 0

The response provides just two fragments of information. The context is sufficient to suggest that the student is referring to the passage, but the response does not address the question.

Standard English Conventions—Score Point 0

There is insufficient length to demonstrate control of standard English conventions. Initial capitalization is missing.

he dosent like it there then he likes it there.

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