

2025 MCAS Sample Student Work and Scoring Guide

Grade 10 English Language Arts

Question 9: 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 that analyzes how two authors develop a specific conflict in a letter and an excerpt on similar topics; use details from the letter and the excerpt to develop the essay.

This item can be found in the released item sets on the [MCAS Resource Center](#).

Essay Prompt

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

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

Based on “Letters from the Dust Bowl” and *The Grapes of Wrath*, write an essay analyzing how the authors develop the conflict between the people and their environment. Be sure to use details from **both** the letter and the excerpt 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/thesis 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/thesis 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/thesis 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/thesis 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/thesis 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 provides an insightful analysis of how the authors develop the conflict between the people and their environment. The last sentence of the introduction asserts that the authors use “vivid mental imagery of the drastic environmental conditions” to show the inadequate attempts of the people in dealing with the challenges they faced. Details are skillfully organized to express how the hardships of living through the Dust Bowl are presented within the letter and the excerpt. The first body paragraph explains how the “detailed mental picture of the landscape” provided by Henderson shows “the severity of the environment” and how the “mental imagery” created by Steinbeck helps readers understand the extreme “amount of dust” that people experienced. The second body paragraph incorporates details from both the letter and the excerpt to show how people were affected by the environmental conditions: “The extreme winds and weather conditions in the environment caused the corn to be ripped from the ground, consequently taking away the people[']s sustenance.” The third body paragraph discusses the ways people coped with the challenges. Despite the “resourcefulness and determination” of the people, their efforts continued to be inadequate. Relevant evidence is skillfully selected and explained throughout the body paragraphs. The essay demonstrates a rich expression of ideas and a full awareness of the task and mode.

Standard English Conventions 3A

Grammar, usage, and mechanics are consistently controlled across a variety of complex sentence structures: “From describing these struggles, readers get a better understanding of the direct challenges people faced during this time and the severity of the situation.” Minor errors in spelling do not interfere with communication. The length and complexity of sentences provide the opportunity to demonstrate consistent control of standard English conventions.

From "Letters from the Dust Bowl" by Caroline A. Henderson and *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck, the reader grows a large understanding of the conflict between people and their environment during the Dust Bowl, a period of severe droughts in the United States during the 1930s. The sources do this by painting a picture and giving vivid mental imagery of the drastic environmental conditions, describing the extreme affects of the Dust Bowl on the people, and describing the ways people attempted to overcome the challenges they were faced with that were ultimately inadequate.

Both sources give their reader a detailed mental picture of the landscape and environment at the time. As stated in "Letters from the Dust Bowl," "...for there is rarely a day when at some time the dust clouds do not roll over. 'Visibility' approaches zero and everything is covered again with a silt-like deposit which may vary in depth from a film to actual ripples on the kitchen floor." (Paragraph 2). By describing the silt in such detail, with reference to how they fill the air and cover the kitchen floor in ripples, the author's use of creating a picture fully accentuates the severity of the environment and gives readers a better understanding of such. Steinbeck also uses the method of creating mental imagery to further our understanding of the environmental severity, states in *The Grapes of Wrath*, "Every moving thing lifted the dust into the air: a walking man lifted a thin layer as high as his waist, and a wagon lifted the dust as high as the fence tops, and an automobile boomed a cloud behind it. The dust was long in settling back again." (Paragraph 3). Described in this paragraph is the outrageously high amount of dust. From this quote, readers are able to better understand how extreme the amount of dust was that people of the time were suffering through by explaining how so much dust is kicked up from the little movement of a man walking and then stays in the air, not settling until much later.

After setting the scene by describing the extreme environmental conditions, both sources then explained the affects it caused and the challenges people faced. As explained by Henderson in "Letters from the Dust Bowl," "It fills the air and our eyes and noses and throats, and, worst of all, our furrows, where tender shoots are coming to the surface only to be buried by the smothering silt from the fields..." (Paragraph 6). This quote is describing how the silt that is filling the people's very breath also fills the fields of their crops, smothering any chance they may have at growing and therefore depriving the people of their source of food. These challenges are also described in *The Grapes of Wrath* where the author states, "...the corn fought the wind with its weakened leaves until the roots were freed by the prying wind and then each stalk settled wearily sideways toward the earth and pointed the direction of the wind." (Paragraph 6). The extreme winds and weather conditions in the environment caused the corn to be ripped from the ground, consequently taking away the people's sustenance. They now had even less to live off of, when lack of rain made growing hard and wind ripped crops from the ground, the people struggled severely. From describing these struggles, readers get a better understanding of the direct challenges people faced during this time and the severity of the situation.

The conflict between environment and the people was then accentuated most by both authors when they describe all that the people did in attempt to overcome these challenges. In "Letters from the Dust Bowl" the author states, "Wearing our shade hats, with handkerchiefs tied over our faces and vaseline in our nostrils, we have been trying to rescue our home from the accumulations of wind-blown dust which penetrates wherever air can go." (Paragraph 2). Henderson explains all which the people do in effort of protecting themselves from the dust, only for it to be inadequate and still help very little. The extremity of the dust was too much and the people suffered regardless. As similarly explained in *Grapes of Wrath*, "Houses were shut tight, and cloth wedged around doors and windows, but the dust came in so thinly that it could not be seen in the air, and it settled like pollen on the chairs and tables, on the dishes." (Paragraph 9). Despite putting clothes in windows and doors, all which the people did still did not prevent the dust that filtered the air and the people were victim to silt on their floors, chairs, and dishes. These quotes strongly accentuate the conflict by showing how despite all the people's efforts, little comes out of it and they suffer significantly despite their resourcefulness and determination.

Both sources "Letters from the Dust Bowl" and *The Grapes of Wrath* accurately describe the conflict between the people and their environment by painting a picture, describing the affects, and describing how people reacted.

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Idea Development—Score Point 5B

The essay skillfully explains how the authors develop the conflict between the people and their environment during the Dust Bowl. The introduction notes that the essay will discuss how “the authors develop the conflict by setting the scene, showing how the people try to combat their habitat, and then highlighting how their efforts were ineffective.” The first body paragraph uses relevant evidence from the letter to establish the conflict created by the setting before discussing how people tried to cope with the “serious and complex” problem of the dust. The paragraph also notes that despite attempts to “combat” the environment, the efforts were ineffective. The second body paragraph uses the same approach and incorporates details from the excerpt to show the conflict between the people and their environment. The paragraph skillfully observes how Steinbeck paints a “picture in the reader’s mind about what the setting looks like” and how the people’s inability “to figure out an effective way to solve the dust problem creates more tension.” The conclusion notes that the main conflict in the letter and the excerpt is the uncertainty of the characters who “do not know what will happen to them, their land, and their families.” The ideas in this essay are organized with one body paragraph focused on the letter and another body paragraph focused on the excerpt. The analysis of details from the letter and the excerpt, whether through quoted evidence or paraphrased evidence, supports a rich expression of ideas and a full awareness of the task and mode.

Standard English Conventions 3B

The essay demonstrates consistent control of a variety of sentence forms: “Again, the reluctance to move and inability to figure out an effective way to solve the dust problem creates more tension and highlights the conflict between the people and their environment.” Minor errors and misspellings are present but do not interfere with meaning. Grammar, usage, and mechanics are controlled throughout. The essay shows consistent control of standard English conventions.

For centuries, humans and their environment have always been at odds with each other, whether it's natural disasters or catastrophes caused by man. In "Letters from the Dust Bowl" and *Grapes of Wrath*, both authors focus in on the droughts and dust storms in the south central prairies. Both passages highlight how the Dust Bowl period impacted the people that lived in those areas. In both "Letters from the Dust Bowl" and *The Grapes of Wrath*, the authors develop the conflict by setting the scene, showing how the people try to combat their habitat, and then highlighting how their efforts were ineffective.

In "Letters from the Dust Bowl", Henderson writes to her friend, Evelyn, about the struggles of life during the Dust Bowl and how she has to combat it. She describes the scenario to Evelyn, noting how it went from being an abundant, green area to dark and dust-covered. Then, she details how she and the other people who live in her community are trying to combat the environment: "Some seal the windows with the gummed paper strips used in wrapping parcels, but no method is fully effective" (Henderson 2). Henderson notes how none of the methods they use are actually all that effective in stopping the dust. This makes the reader believe in how serious and complex this problem is as there seems to be no way to stop the dust from spreading and impacting the people who are locked away safe in their homes. Henderson continues to write her letter, detailing how hard it is living in the Dust Bowl. Even though it is clearly challenging, she is unprepared to leave. She says that she does miss having animals, good crops, and cash flow, but she also says that "To leave voluntarily--to break all these closely knit ties for the sake of a possibly greater comfort elsewhere--seems like defaulting on our task" (Henderson 8). Even though living in the Dust Bowl is tough, Henderson does not want to leave unless she has to. This makes the conflict even bigger and more complicated as it highlights the struggles of having an environment that is actively working against you.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the conflict between the people and the environment is especially highlighted at the end when the reader sees how the community responds to the events. The author sets the scene with detailed descriptions, painting a picture in the reader's mind about what the setting looks like. The author notes that "the dawn came, but no day" (Steinbeck 7). The author's choice to highlight the darkness that the dust has cast on the world shows how troublesome the dust is. It is thick and heavy enough to cast a sense of darkness of the landscape, and is able to harm the inhabitants. As the excerpt continues, the reader sees every way in which the dust impacts the prairie people from having to wear hats and masks to the dust itself covering their crops. Similarly to in "Letters from the Dust Bowl" however, the inhabitants do not seem keen on moving. As the problem grows, "they asked, What'll we do? and the men replied, I don't know... The men sat still--thinking--figuring" (Steinbeck 11). Again, the reluctance to move and inability to figure out an effective way to solve the dust problem creates more tension and highlights the conflict between the people and their environment. This is because it has a sense of foreboding, making the reader wonder what *will* happen when the characters are not sure themselves.

Simply put, the main thing that creates more conflict in both these passages is the uncertainty of the characters in the story. They do not know how to combat the dust, and therefore they do not know what will happen to them, their land, and their families as a result.

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Idea Development—Score Point 4

The essay is well-developed and effectively organized. The introduction provides an overview of the events of the Dust Bowl and outlines how both authors develop the conflict between the people and their environment. The first body paragraph addresses the change from “fertile land to terrible dust” and uses one quotation from the letter for support. The second body paragraph effectively discusses how the authors “highlight conflict by explaining the frustration that the people of the Dust Bowl had due to their helplessness.” The third body paragraph also effectively incorporates details from both the letter and the excerpt to support the point that even though the “Dust Bowl would never stop tormenting the people,” the people “refused to give up.” The conclusion reiterates the ideas introduced in the last sentence of the introduction. Relevant evidence is effectively selected throughout the essay, and details are paraphrased and woven into the explanation. The essay demonstrates a full awareness of the task and mode.

Standard English Conventions 3C

The length and complexity of the essay are sufficient to demonstrate consistent control of standard English conventions. Overall, sentences are correct and clear in meaning. Grammar, usage, and mechanics are consistently controlled: “The authors of ‘Letters from the Dust Bowl’ and *The Grapes of Wrath* both show conflict between the people and their environment by showing how sudden the situation became bad, how helpless the people were to prevent their situation, and by how stubborn they were too move on.” Minor errors in usage of “too” in the introduction and the conclusion do not interfere with communication.

The Dust Bowl of the 1930's was an environmental disaster that resulted in the decimation of an entire ecosystem and community. As intense farming and little rains ravaged the lands, many of the people that depended on the land for survival left in hope of a better situation in other parts of the country. However, there were a small amount that decided to stay and try to weather the storm. These people were usually farmers who had stayed on the land for generations and did not want to give up their heritage. But, The Dust Bowl had a terrible climate and tortured the people that stayed. The authors of "Letters from the Dust Bowl" and *The Grapes of Wrath* use this as a way to develop conflict between the people and their environment by how sudden the situation became bad, how helpless they were to prevent their situation, and by how stubborn they were too move on.

"Letters from the Dust Bowl" highlights how sudden and disasterous the change from fertile land to terrible dust was. The author describes how it was "a difficult change to crowd into one short day's travel" ("Letters from the Dust Bowl", 2). The author uses this to illustrate how the people that lived through the Dust Bowl were unprepared for this drastic shift in climate. This emphasises the conflict between the people and the environment because it shows that many of the people that lived in the dust bowl felt they could not prevent it due to this sudden change.

Steinbeck, the author of *The Grapes of Wrath*, also builds conflict between the people and the Dust Bowl by highlighting how they could not do anything to stop it. This is apparant when Steinbeck describes how men would stand outside and survey their ruined crops and ponder their situation (*The Grapes of Wrath*, 11). Steinbeck uses this example to explain that there was nothing the people could do to prevent the damage of the Dust Bowl. This technique is also utilized by the author of "Letters from the Dust Bowl". The author describes how many of the methods that people used to prevent harm caused by the dust were ineffective. For example, many people tried using cloth and towels to block dust from entering homes but is "an almost hopeless task" ("Letters from the Dust Bowl", 2). The authors of both passages highlight conflict by explaining the frustration that the people of the Dust Bowl had due to their helplessness.

Lastly, both authors highlight how stubborn many of them were to move on. This causes conflict because it shows that the people did not want to give up and would continue to fight. This is seen in "Letters of the Dust Bowl" when the author describes how leaving the Dust Bowl would be "like defaulting on our task" ("Letters from the Dust Bowl", 7). Additionally, Steinbeck explains this through his example of the men examining their situation, and how they became increasingly more mad. He also shows that the men would "[sit] still--thinking--figuring" (*The Grapes of Wrath*, 11). These examples enhance the conflict between the people and their enviornment to show how neither would stop. The Dust Bowl would never stop tormenting the people, and the people refused to give up.

The authors of "Letters from the Dust Bowl" and *The Grapes of Wrath* both show conflict between the people and their environment by showing how sudden the situation became bad, how helpless the people were to prevent their situation, and by how stubborn they were too move on.

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Idea Development—Score Point 3

The essay is moderately developed and provides a general analysis of how the authors develop “a harrowing conflict between the natural elements and the people near Oklahoma during the Dust Bowl.” The introduction states that there is a “tell it how it is” approach used in the letter and a “more empathetic approach” used in the excerpt. The first body paragraph includes appropriate textual evidence from the letter as well as some explanation of what people faced in coping with “the harsh weather conditions and the extreme dust clouds.” The second body paragraph focuses on how Steinbeck used “descriptive language and vivid imagery” to show “how detrimental the dust storms” were during this time period. Although both body paragraphs discuss the approaches used by the authors to develop the conflict between the people and their environment, the contrast in the authors’ writing styles could have been further explained. The conclusion notes that both authors “mainly focus on empathy” to try “to get the audience to understand that it was hard and detrimental.” The essay shows an adequate expression of ideas and sufficient awareness of the task and mode.

Standard English Conventions 3D

The essay demonstrates the use of varied sentence forms as well as correct grammar, usage, and mechanics. Minor spelling errors and awkward phrasing (such as the first sentence of the conclusion) do not detract from the overall fluency of the writing. The length and complexity of the essay demonstrate consistent control of standard English conventions.

In the texts *Letters from the Dust Bowl* as well as *The Grapes of Wrath*, the author develops a harrowing conflict between the natural elements and the people near Oklahoma during the Dust Bowl. The author from *Letters from the Dust Bowl*, uses a more impractical, "tell it how it is" approach, describing the events as very impractical to their home life and their environment on the farm. The author from *The Grapes of Wrath* uses a more empathetic approach to describe the hardships of losing valuable crops and farm land.

In *Letters from the Dust Bowl*, the author uses a very detailed approach when it came to describing the impracticality of how the farmers and settlers had it when it came to the Dust Bowl on the prairie. Describing that it was more difficult to leave than to do anything else, because of the harsh weather conditions and the extreme dust clouds. Henderson states "Wearing our shade hats, with handkerchiefs tied over our faces and vaseline in our nostrils, we have been trying to rescue our home from the accumulations of wind-blown dust which penetrates wherever air can go." (Henderson 2). This is describing the harsh impracticality the settlers faced when it came to dust clouds. They used everything they could when they tried to protect themselves from the irritating dust and everything they could to protect their homes from it as well.

The author from *The Grapes Of Wrath* takes empathy and sincerity to a new level when describing the events of the Dust Bowl. Using descriptive language and vivid imagery, John Steinback shows how detrimental the dust storms and drought were in this time period of Oklahoma and surrounding territories. Steinback reveals "The weeds frayed and edged back toward their roots. The air was thin and the sky more pale; and every day the earth paled." (Steinback 2). The author is describing the harsh effects the dust had on the crops and environment during the drought. He is using descriptive language to describe how difficult it was to have crops during this time, which made people money. Steinback also takes on impracticality when describing how there were no crops, which mean't no money.

Both of the authors although different writing styles, both used descriptive words and imagery to have the reader feel a sense of empathy and sincerity, while also focusing on how impractical the situation was as well. Both of the authors mainly focus on empathy, trying to get the audience to understand that it was hard and detrimental to the economy as well as their own lifestyle.

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Idea Development—Score Point 2

The essay includes a somewhat developed central idea and limited organization. The first paragraph addresses how the author of the letter develops the conflict between the people and their environment by portraying “the drastic difference” between Kansas and Oklahoma and by using descriptive words such as “‘disheartening’ and ‘irritating.’” The second paragraph explains how Steinbeck “uses words to describe the dust like ‘sluggish smoke.’” A brief concluding sentence reiterates the point that both authors create conflict “between man and envi[ron]ment in many ways.” There is a basic expression of ideas and a partial awareness of the task and mode.

Standard English Conventions 2

The essay demonstrates mostly consistent control of standard English conventions relative to length and complexity. The essay contains some misspellings and errors in grammar and punctuation: “When the author talks about the enviroment in Oklahoma thing take a turn. The author desribed the weather with saying, ‘the dust-covered desolation of No Man’s Land’ the conflict between her and nature arises.” The overall meaning is generally clear, and the writing includes different sentence structures.

Authors from the "Letters from the Dust Bowl" and "The Grapes of Wrath" develop conflict between people and their enviornment. In "Letters from the Dust Bowl" The author starts off by talking about Carolines life in Kansas "green pastures, luxuriant foliage, abundance of flowers, and promise of a generous harvest." This helps to later build conflict because you can see the drastic difference between the enviornment of Kansas and Oklahoma. When the author talks about the enviornment in Oklahoma thing take a turn. The author desribed the weather with saying, "the dust-covered desolation of No Man's Land" the conflict between her and nature arises. Caroline uses various description words to describe the dust storm that helps the reader see the conflict between people and the enviornment such as, "disheartening" and "irritating". Using description words is also a tool John Steinback uses in "The Grapes of Wrath" to portray conflict between human and nature.

John Steinbeck uses words to describe the dust like "sluggish smoke". One big way he creates conflict is by mentioning how the weather was effecting the people. He did this on multiple occasions "men and women huddled in their houses" and "people stirred restlessly" This is really helpful to show how much the weather changed peoples lives for the worst. Both authors create conflict between man and enviornment in many ways in "Letters from the Dust Bowl" and "The Grapes of Wrath".

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Idea Development—Score Point 1

The central idea is not developed in this brief response. The response includes mostly a retelling of what occurred in the letter. The analysis of how the authors develop the conflict between the people and their environment is insufficient. While the response references the titles of both the letter and the excerpt, no details were included as supporting evidence from the excerpt. There is a poor expression of ideas and a minimal awareness of the task.

Standard English Conventions 1

The response is brief and shows little complexity. Multiple errors in spelling (“graduly,” “pulluted,” “hazerdous”) are evident in the brief response. The response demonstrates little control of standard English conventions for this grade level.

Throughout the two excerpts of *“Letters from the Dust Bowl”* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, the authors graduly shows a conflict brewing between the people and their enviornment. The author describes how the dust bowl is essentially putting a dent in their lives. People's food sources such as on farms are being put on pause. Familys must come up with resourceful ways to keep the dust from slipping through the cracks of their houses witht objects lying around. They used handkercheifs to tie around their mouth in order to not inhale the pulluted air. These situations are slowly making people go crazy sitting in their homes because their enviornment around them is hazerdous.

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Idea Development—Score Point 0

The response references the letter and the excerpt but does not respond to the prompt. There is no analysis of how the authors develop conflict between the people and their environment.

Standard English Conventions 0

Two incorrectly formed sentences are not enough to demonstrate any control of standard English conventions.

the letter from the dust bowl is about someone's personal expirence being in or around when the dust bowl happened.

the grapes of wrath is about the weather and what it does to things like ant lions and gophers, or the crops that people planted

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