

# 2026 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 that explains how the author develops a specific character trait in an excerpt; use evidence from the excerpt to support the essay.

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

#### Essay Prompt

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For this question, you will write an essay based on the passage. The essay should be about four to five paragraphs in length. Be sure to:

- Include a central idea.
- Use evidence from the passage to support the central idea.
- Use correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

Based on *Shane*, write an essay explaining how the author develops a sense of mystery about Shane. Use evidence from the excerpt to develop your essay.

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*Continue to the following page to see the scoring guides for this question. Sample student responses begin on page 4. 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.**

| <b>Score*</b>                                          | <b>Description</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|--------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <a href="#"><u>5A</u></a><br><a href="#"><u>5B</u></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="#"><u>4</u></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="#"><u>3</u></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="#"><u>2</u></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="#"><u>1</u></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="#"><u>0</u></a>                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The response shows evidence the student has read the text, but does not address the question or incorrectly responds to the question.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                      |

**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><br><a href="#">3B</a><br><a href="#">3C</a><br><a href="#">3D</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="#">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>                                                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sentences are formed incorrectly with no control of grammar, usage, and mechanics and/or insufficient length</li></ul>                                                                                    |

\*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 5A**

The essay presents a fully developed, insightful central idea about how Shane is “quite mysterious” and has an “ability to dodge any and all questions regarding his personal life.” Relevant evidence from the excerpt is skillfully incorporated throughout the essay to support the idea that “Shane might not be exactly as he seems.” Explanations consistently connect the evidence to the central idea, demonstrating a deep understanding of how the author develops mystery through characterization, dialogue, and the narrator’s reactions. The essay includes a balanced selection of quotations from different parts of the excerpt. Organization is effective, moving logically from the narrator’s feelings to Shane’s behavior and finally to the parents’ perspective, adding depth to the analysis. Ideas are richly expressed: “It is hard to see the true side to Shane when each and every part of his life is a mystery to both the narrator and the reader.” The essay shows a full awareness of the task and mode.

**Standard English Conventions 3A**

The essay demonstrates consistent control of a variety of sentence structures relative to the length of the essay. Both simple and more complex sentence constructions are included in the essay, supporting clarity and flow. Quotations are formatted correctly and integrated smoothly, reflecting consistent control of grammar, usage, and mechanics.

In *Shane* the author portrays Shane as quite mysterious. He describes a 'chill' that he feels often times in the presence of Shane while also explaining Shane's ability to dodge any and all questions regarding his personal life. The way Shane is depicted suggests he only shares what he feels is needed to have a conversation.

In more than one moment the author recalls getting a chill down his spine while talking to Shane. In paragraph 7 it states, "As I noticed this, a sudden chill, I could not have told why, struck through me there in the warm and open sun." For context, the narrator was describing Shane's face when he noticed Shane's eyes wondering around the farm, taking in everything. Despite never speaking a word with Shane the author felt an unexplained chill just at the sight of him. In paragraph 10 the text explains, "I saw his eyes slow on the flower mother had planted by the porch steps... They shifted back to me, and again, without knowing why, I felt that sudden chill." Once again with no reason at all the kid, the boy feels an unsettling chill at simply the sight of Shane. It is as if something in his body is trying to warn him or tell him that Shane might not be exactly as he seems. In paragraph 21 the story says, "At the first sound of father's voice, the man and the horse, like a single being, had wheeled to face us, the man's eyes boring at father, bright and deep in the shadow of the hat's brim. I was shivering, struck through once more. Something intangible and cold and terrifying was there in the air between us." Clearly the boy feels something is off about Shane. More than once a strange and mysterious feeling has alerted the narrator. This description of the unsettling and strange 'chill' that the boy experiences when near Shane makes the reader wonder if there is more to Shane than what he is saying.

In addition to unexplained feelings around Shane the narrator also tells the reader about Shane's ability to pick and choose which questions he answers. In paragraph 30 it states, "He was mild and courteous and spoke readily enough. But always he put them off with words that gave no real information." At dinner although the conversation seems to be flowing it is important to note that Shane is answering questions with no real answer. It is similar to when somebody is "media trained" meaning they know how to spin questions in a way that doesn't give the full answer but gives just enough to satisfy people. However, Shane not answering questions directly does make the family wonder if there is something he is hiding. In paragraph 31 more of the dinner conversation is explained, "He must have been riding for many days, for he was full of news from towns along his back trail as far as Cheyenne and even Dodge City and others beyond I had never heard of before. But he had no news about himself. His past was fenced as tightly as out pasture." Shane is continuing to not answer any questions. He will not explain his past or even where he grew up. This adds more mystery to his character as there is no information about him. It is hard to see the true side to Shane when each and every part of his life is a mystery to both the narrator and the reader. The dialogue in paragraphs 40 through 46 explains the parents' perspective on Shane, " 'Wasn't it peculiar,' I heard mother say, 'how he wouldn't talk about himself?' 'Peculiar?' said father. 'Well, yes. In a way. 'Everything about him is peculiar,' Mother sounded as if she was stirred up and interested. 'I never saw a man quite like him before.'... 'I like him.' Mother's voice was serious. 'He's so nice and polite and sort of gentle. Not like most men I've met out here. But there's something about him. Something underneath the gentleness... Something... Dangerous.' " The mother has similar opinions to that of the boy and the reader. She sees Shane as peculiar and different from any other man. Something worth thinking about is that she calls Shane dangerous. Since Shane refused to answer any questions regarding his personal life and where he came from it is hard to not think about possible secrets he may be hiding. This lack of knowledge about Shane forces the reader to see him as mysterious and a bit peculiar.

Throughout the story it is clear that Shane is a mysterious character. His way of turning the room cold and unsettling with one glare sets a strange and almost scary mood to the story. Without any knowledge of who he truly is due to his inability to answer questions makes it impossible to not wonder about what he may or may not be hiding. You will never know who people really are because you never know what they are hiding.



**Idea Development 5B**

The central idea is insightful and fully developed throughout the essay with rich analysis and specific evidence from the excerpt. The introduction begins with an inclusion of relevant plot points that demonstrate the ways in which “the author creates a sense of mystery about Shane” by “depicting him as both safe and dangerous.” The essay expands upon this idea by discussing the overall nature of Shane’s character in the body paragraphs using relevant evidence from the excerpt for support. Quotations are skillfully woven into the original analysis and consistently reinforce the idea that Shane’s “true nature” is not known to the reader. The essay further discusses how “Shane’s appearance adds to the sense of mystery around him.” The carefully selected examples combined with a rich expression of ideas show a full awareness of the task and mode.

**Standard English Conventions 3B**

The essay uses a variety of techniques and sentence structures and maintains consistent control of grammar. Textual evidence is cited skillfully with proper punctuation, showing a command of grammar, usage, and mechanics. Varied sentence structures and proper grammar usage relative to the length of the essay demonstrate consistent control of standard English conventions.

In the excerpt of *Shane*, the author creates a feeling of mystery about the character Shane. In this excerpt, the narrator, a young boy named Bob, sees a man riding a horse. This man unsettles Bob a little, however he also feels impressed by the stranger. The man approaches Bob’s father and then asks for water. Bob’s father allows it, and then asks him to stay for dinner. The stranger agrees to stay and introduces himself as Shane. At dinner, he doesn’t reveal anything about himself. This makes Bob’s mother nervous, but his father believes that Shane won’t be dangerous towards them and that he’s safe. Throughout this excerpt, the author creates a sense of mystery about Shane by not revealing anything about his life, depicting him as both safe and dangerous, and his appearance.

In this excerpt of *Shane*, the author doesn’t reveal anything about Shane. This creates a sense of mystery about his character. For example, the author writes, “But he had no news about himself. His past was fenced tightly as our pasture” (31). Shane doesn’t tell the Starret’s anything about himself. All he tells them is that he’s riding through to see places he’s not seen before. The author gives the reader no background information on Shane. By keeping his life secret, the author creates a sense of mystery around Shane’s character.

Shane is described as both dangerous and safe in this excerpt, making it unknown what his true nature is. At the end of the excerpt, Bob’s father and mother are talking about their mysterious guest. Bob’s father says “‘He’s dangerous all right.’ Father said it in a musing way. Then he chuckled. ‘But not to us my dear.’...‘In fact, I don’t think you ever had a safer man in your house.’” Bob’s father is describing Shane as safe to them but dangerous to others. It’s unknown to the reader how Shane could be dangerous, or why the Starret’s are safe. By depicting Shane as safe and dangerous, two contrasting traits, the author creates a feeling of mystery about what Shane is really like.

Finally, the last way the author creates a sense of mystery about Shane is in his appearance. The narrator describes him as wearing dark trousers, a belt, a dark coat, and a brown shirt. He also wears an unusual looking hat. It’s black with a creased crown and wide brim. The narrator describes Shane’s physical appearance as, “...medium height...endurance in the lines of that dark figure and the quiet power...” (6). The narrator also adds, “...eyes were endlessly searching from side to side and forward, checking off every item in view, missing nothing” (7). Shane is dressed in all dark colors, which is odd. He doesn’t look very strong, but Bob can tell he is. He looks mostly normal, but when Bob sees his eyes, he begins to feel unsettled by Shane. Shane’s appearance adds to the sense of mystery around him.

In conclusion, in the excerpt of *Shane*, the author develops a sense of mystery about Shane. By not revealing anything about himself, Shane makes himself seem mysterious. He is also described as both dangerous and safe, which adds the mystery of who he really is. Finally, Shane’s appearance causes the narrator to feel unsettled, which contributes to the sense of mystery. Throughout the excerpt, Shane is depicted as unsettling and mysterious.

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**Idea Development 4**

The introduction of the essay presents the central idea that the author develops a sense of mystery about Shane through “his description, his tone, and the overall thoughts of him.” The central idea is well developed throughout the essay, with effective body paragraphs that expand upon how the description of Shane, voice and dialogue of Shane, and other characters’ thoughts about Shane all contribute to the sense of mystery about Shane. Body paragraphs are effectively organized by ideas and include well-selected quotes that support the central idea. There is a full awareness of task and mode.

**Standard English Conventions 3C**

The essay uses a variety of techniques and sentence structures while sustaining consistent control of grammar and mechanics. Textual evidence is cited correctly, with proper punctuation that reinforces the command of standard English conventions. Minor grammatical errors are present but do not impede understanding.

In *Shane*, the author seems to develop a sense of mystery about Shane. This novel is about a boy called Bob who lives on a ranch with his family when he sees a stranger soon approaching. Bob seems to admire him from afar not noticing the danger of it. The novel *Shane* experiences Shane's mystery through his description, his tone, and the overall thoughts of him.

The mystery about Shane all starts with his description. Bob, the narrator, explains all the details about Shane since he admires him so much. Bob explains what impressed him most of Shane was his clothes when he says: "He wore dark trousers of some serge material tucked into tall boots and held at the waist by a wide belt, both of a soft black leather tooled in intricate design. A coat of the same dark material as the trousers was neatly folded and strapped to his saddle-roll." In this quote, it is seen that Bob was intrigued by Shane's clothes to put it in such detail.

The tone of Shane's voice and his dialogue make his character have more of a sense of mystery. Shane has the type of character in which readers often question about his character a lot. Most of Shane's dialogue has a sense of mystery to it, for example: " 'Well now,' said Shane, 'that's mighty interesting. I've been hearing the same quite a lot lately from men with pretty clear heads. Maybe there's something to it.' " In this quote, Shane seems to have a lot of mystery in his tone.

In *Shane*, most of Shane's sense of mystery is also developed from the family's thoughts on him. While Bob is very intrigued by Shane in a good way, his father is intrigued by him in a not so good way. The mother, although, actually likes Shane and thinks very well of him. The father has a distinct feeling from Shane in which is a dangerous type of feeling. This is established when the father says: " 'He's dangerous all right.' Father said it in a musing way. Then he chuckled. 'But not to us, my dear.' And then he said what seemed to me a curious thing. 'In fact, I don't think you ever had a safer man in your house.' " This quote leaves readers with a lot to think about Shane and the mystery behind him.

In the novel *Shane*, Jack Schaefer really puts a sense of mystery to Shane's character. The family all has different opinions of Shane with Bob being amused by him, the father thinking poorly of him, and the mother liking him. The novel establishes this sense of mystery through Shane's description, his tone, and what the family thinks of him.

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**Idea Development 3**

The essay begins with a brief introduction and presents a general central idea about how “the author conveys a sense of mystery about Shane” by “making everything Shane says sound vague and unclear.” Appropriate quotes are selected from throughout the excerpt and are used to explain how Shane is a “mysterious character.” Organization of ideas is moderate and uses basic transitional phrases: “the first way,” “the second way,” and “in conclusion.” The ideas within each paragraph and the explanations throughout the essay are moderately developed. There is sufficient awareness of the task and mode.

**Standard English Conventions 3D**

The essay demonstrates consistent control of a variety of sentence structures relative to the length of the essay, including both simple and more complex constructions that support clarity. The essay shows consistent control of grammar, usage, and mechanics relative to the complexity of the response. Minor errors are present, but do not impede understanding.

In the excerpt from the historical fiction story *Shane* by Jack Schaefer, the author conveys a sense of mystery about Shane by contradicting himself, as well as making everything Shane says sound vague and unclear.

The first way the author shows that Shane is a mysterious character is by contradicting the details they give about Shane, making the writing about him very unclear and hard to follow. Paragraph eight was a perfect example of this: “He rode easily, relaxed in the saddle, leaning his weight lazily into the stirrups. Yet even in this easiness was a suggestion of tension. It was the easiness of a coiled spring, of a trap set.” The quote describes Shane’s riding as tense but also relaxed and lazy. These words don’t go hand in hand, they contradict each other. It shows mystery because although they are describing him, you aren’t learning anything about him. It makes his character more confusing and interesting.

The second way the author conveys a sense of mystery about Shane is by making Shane’s answers vague. By doing this, it makes the characters in the excerpt wonder about Shane. If the characters find Shane unusual and mysterious, then the reader would also probably wonder about him. If the characters had thought Shane was a completely normal guy, then the reader would’ve probably thought Shane was normal, too. In paragraphs forty to forty-two the protagonists’ parents are discussing their new guest: ““Wasn’t it peculiar,” I heard mother say, “how he wouldn’t talk about himself?” “Peculiar?” said father. “Well, yes. In a way.” “Everything about him is peculiar.” Mother sounded as if she was stirred up and interested. “I never saw a man quite like him before.”” This quote shows that the protagonist’s family finds Shane to be different from most people. They say that they’ve never seen anyone like him before. This makes the reader feel Shane is even more mysterious because even the characters find him ‘peculiar’.

In conclusion, the author conveys a sense of mystery about Shane by contradicting himself and saying he was strange, even to the characters. It shows he’s mysterious because throughout the excerpt you don’t learn anything about Shane, even though the whole excerpt is about him.

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**Idea Development 2**

The essay is partially developed and consists mostly of a restatement of events in the excerpt with some details and limited explanations. The central idea, "Shane is shown as a mysterious person," is basic and only partially developed. The essay includes a list of ideas from the excerpt with limited explanations of the quotes that were chosen. Ideas are somewhat developed with a limited selection of evidence from the excerpt, demonstrating a partial awareness of the task and mode.

**Standard English Conventions 2**

The essay shows mostly consistent control of standard English conventions relative to the essay's length and complexity. Some errors in spelling and punctuation are present, but do not impede understanding. The reliance on direct quotes in a brief essay shows only mostly consistent control of standard English conventions.

In the excerpt *Shane* by Jack Schaefer, Shane is shown as a mysterious person. At first, Bob was impressed by Shane with his clothes. As he approached closer, Bob knew that something was wrong about him.

When they first met, Shane looked like an easy-going person, but Bob could sense something tense about him. Bob and his father allowed Shane to rest at their barn and take some water for himself and his horse. As they spent more time with each other, "...father and the stranger looked at each other a long moment, measuring each other in an unspoken fraternity of adult knowledge beyond my reach." (paragraph 22). The father and Shane looked as if exchanged a look, but there could've been some knowledge exchange between the two.

As Shane, Bob, and the father began to bond with each other, Bob began to notice some things as well. He only asked questions about Bob or the father, never said anything about himself, it was as if he was hiding something. The next day, Bob's family began to talk about Shane. "Wasn't it peculiar," "...how he wouldn't talk about himself" (paragraph 40).

The family couldn't figure out why Shane was being so mysterious. The only thing that they knew was that he was a dangerous person to others.

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**Idea Development 1**

The central idea that the author creates a sense of mystery about Shane through a “fierce and laid back attitude” is not developed. The response relies on a single example from the excerpt and provides a minimal explanation with insufficient evidence and details. Ideas are stated but not further explained, resulting in poor expression of ideas and little analysis of how the evidence supports the claim. Organization is minimal, and the response demonstrates minimal awareness of the task and mode.

**Standard English Conventions 1**

The response demonstrates little control of grammar, usage, and mechanics relative to its length and complexity, as frequent errors in sentence formation, punctuation, and usage are evident. These errors disrupt fluency and make parts of the response difficult to follow. The writing also shows little control and limited variety in sentence structure, relying primarily on simple constructions that do not support clarity.

The author develops a sense of mystery about Shane by having a fierce and laid back attitude. One quote explains, “He rode easily, relaxed in his saddle, leaning his weight lazily into the stirrups. Yet even in this easiness was a suggestion of tension.” This quote is paragraph 8 and it explains how he has a laid back attitude. This shows that the author develops a sense of mystery about Shane from his laid back and fierce attitude.

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**Idea Development 0**

The response does not address the prompt. Although the student references a detail from the excerpt, demonstrating that the student read the excerpt, the response does not demonstrate understanding of the task or mode.

**Standard English Conventions 0**

No control is demonstrated in the simple six-word sentence. There is no variation in structure and not enough length or complexity to show any control.

Bob think's Shane is a visitor.

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