

# **PSSA**

# **Assessment**

# **Handbook**

**2012-2013**



**pennsylvania**  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

**PENNSYLVANIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**  
**Bureau of Assessment and Accountability**  
**Division of Assessment**

**PSSA Assessment Handbook: 2012-2013**

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# Introduction

The purpose of this handbook is to provide teachers with the most up-to-date information about the PSSA and help them to prepare students for the test.

This handbook has six sections:

## **Part One: What's new for 2012-2013**

Provides a brief overview of changes for the 2012-2013 PSSA.

## **Part Two: About the Assessment**

Provides a brief history of the PSSA and describes a set of strategies to help teachers better prepare their students for the PSSA and how to align their curriculum to the Assessment Anchors and Pennsylvania Academic Standards.

## **Part Three: Writing**

Provides specific information about the Writing PSSA.

## **Part Four: Mathematics**

Provides specific information about the Mathematics PSSA.

## **Part Five: Reading**

Provides specific information about the Reading PSSA.

## **Part Six: Science**

Provides specific information about the Science PSSA.

## **Part Seven: Frequently Asked Questions**

Provides answers to frequently asked questions (FAQs) on the PSSA and the Assessment Anchors.

This handbook is one of many tools the Department of Education has developed to help teachers better understand the assessment system. In addition to this handbook, the following can be accessed on the PDE website via the [Assessment Homepage](#):

**[Accommodations Guidelines](#)**: The Department released a comprehensive accommodations guide for students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and students with 504-service agreements. Check the website for the current Accommodations Guidelines. This document contains information about the PSSA and student eligibility for accommodations.

The Department also released Accommodations Guidelines for English Language learners.

**Alignment Strategies:** The Department has provided teachers with strategies to ensure classroom practice is aligned to the Assessment Anchors: *Anchors-in-Practice* and *Adopt-An-Anchor*. These strategies are described briefly in this handbook. For more information on these strategies, contact the Intermediate Unit or refer to [Get Ready, Get Set, GO! Assessment Anchor Rollout PowerPoint Presentation](#) or the [Assessment Anchor Toolkit](#).

**Rigor:** The Assessment Anchors have maintained the rigor of the PSSA while clarifying and focusing the assessment. During the item review process, educator committees evaluate items using [Webb's Depth of Knowledge](#) levels. They also identify the difficulty of each item (easy, medium, and hard) for the appropriate grade level assessed.

**[General Performance Level Descriptors](#)** and **[Subject-Specific Performance Level Descriptors](#)**: In compliance with §4.51(b) (4) of the PA School Code the State Board of Education approved, "specific criteria for advanced, proficient, basic and below basic levels of performance."

**[Test Administration Materials](#)**: Manuals for Assessment Coordinators and Test Administrators

**[Item and Scoring Samplers](#)**: Item and Scoring Samplers are useful tools for Pennsylvania educators in the preparation of local instructional programs and the statewide PSSA. The items in the Samplers may be used as examples for creating assessment items at the classroom level, and they may also be copied and used as part of a local instructional program. Classroom teachers may find it beneficial to have students respond to the open-ended items in the samplers. Educators can then use the samplers as a guide to score the responses either independently or together with colleagues within a school or district.

## **Part One: What's New for 2012-2013?**

### **A. The Common Core and Pennsylvania Common Core**

The State Board adopted the Common Core Standards in July 2010. Since that time, the decision was made to craft a set of PA Common Core Standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics. A group of Pennsylvania educators created a draft set of PA Common Core (PACC) Standards. These new standards mirror the content and rigor of Common Core, but reflect the organization and design of the PA Academic Standards.

Field test items aligned to the PACC will appear on all exams in math and reading and a writing standalone field test aligned to the PACC will be given in February. Please refer to the calendar in this handbook for more specific dates.

For more information about these new standards, see the Standards Aligned System website.

### **B. Keystone Exams**

The Keystone Exams are end-of-course assessments designed to assess proficiency in various subjects. During the 2012-2013 school year the Algebra I, Literature and Biology Keystone Exams will be operational and will replace Grade 11 PSSA exams.

### **C. Online Testing**

All the PSSA tests will be available online in 2012-2013.

### **C. New for Writing**

A standalone writing field test will take place February 4-February 15, 2013. Grade 3 will have 18 language skills multiple choice items, 4 application of language skills short answer items, and 1 essay (composition) prompt. Grades 4-5 will have 24 language skills multiple choice items and 1 writing (composition) prompt).

For more specific information including samples, see the Getting Ready presentation for 2012-2013 and other related documents at the Assessment webpage on the PDE website.

### **D. New for Math**

### **E. New for Reading**

The PSSA Reading test has new items aligned to the PACC that will be field tested this year. Grades 2-5 will see Selected Response (SR) multiple choice items and Text Dependent Analysis

(TDA) items. SR's are worth 1 or 2 points. A TDA resembles an essay answer. It is worth 4 points and is scored with a holistic rubric. The response will be scored for accuracy and structure so reflects both comprehension and writing skills.

For more information including examples see the Getting Ready presentation for 2012-2013 and related documents on the Assessment webpage at the PDE website.

## **F. New for Science**

### **Part Two: About the Assessment**

#### **A. Overview of the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA)**

Like most state assessment systems, the PSSA has evolved over time. The following is a brief description of the adoption of Academic Standards in Pennsylvania and the evolution of the PSSA since 1998.

##### ***Chapter 4***

On October 21, 1998, the State Board of Education adopted final-form regulations for the new [Chapter 4 of the Pennsylvania School Code](#). Upon conclusion of the regulatory review process, Chapter 4 was published in the January 16, 1999, *Pennsylvania Bulletin* as final rulemaking, binding in all public schools in the Commonwealth.

The new Chapter 4 replaced the previously adopted Chapters 3 and 5, and provided a new direction for the PSSA. Beginning with the 1998–99 assessment, the PSSA became standards-based. Beginning with the February/March 1999 testing, the entire PSSA was aligned with the [Pennsylvania Academic Standards](#). Academic Standards were adopted for Mathematics and for Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening. They identify what should be taught in the classroom.

##### ***Purpose of the PSSA***

As outlined in Chapter 4, the purposes of the PSSA are as follows:

- Provide students, parents, educators, and citizens with an understanding of student and school performance.
- Determine the degree to which school programs enable students to attain proficiency of academic standards.
- Provide results to school districts (including charter schools) and Career and Technical Centers (CTCs) for consideration in the development of strategic plans.
- Provide information to state policymakers, including The General Assembly and the State Board, on how effective schools are in promoting and demonstrating student proficiency of the Academic Standards.
- Provide information to the general public on school performance.

- Provide results to school districts (including charter schools) and CTCs based on the aggregate performance of all students, for students with an IEP, and for those without an IEP.

***No Child Left Behind (NCLB)***

Since the adoption of Chapter 4, federal legislation has required the State to make adjustments in its assessment system. Chapter 4 called for the Statewide Assessment System to include only grades 5, 8, and 11. NCLB requires all states to develop assessments in grades 3–8 and at least one assessment in grades 9–12 for Reading and Mathematics. The Department began assessing grade 3 in 2003, and by 2005--2006 assessments had been developed in Reading and Mathematics for grades 3–8 and 11 as required by NCLB. A Science test has been developed per NCLB requirements at grades 4, 8, and 11 and was operational in the spring of 2008. With the adoption of the Common Core standards in 2010, Pennsylvania has since developed Pennsylvania Common Core (PACC) standards and all PSSA tests will be aligned to these standards. The Keystone Exams, new in 2012, replace all PSSA tests in grade 11 for 2012-2013.

NCLB does not require a separate Writing test, but per Chapter 4, Pennsylvania includes a statewide Writing test at three grade levels. In 2005, the Writing PSSA shifted from grades 6, 9, and 11 to grades 5, 8, and 11. With the implementation of the PACC and new Keystone exams, the PSSA Writing assessments will be administered in grades 5 and 8 in March 2013.

***Teacher Committees***

Teacher committees review every item and writing prompt and provide valuable feedback. They play a critical role in the creation and refinement of the PSSA through their attendance and participation in a variety of meetings. Teacher committees review all of the items to ensure rigor, alignment, and grade-level appropriateness.

**B. 2012 - 2013 Testing Dates**

The following is the calendar for the administration of the PSSA for the 2012--2013 school year:

<b>Assessment</b>	<b>Dates</b>	<b>Grade(s)</b>
<b>PSSA Grade 12 Retest in Math, Reading, Science, and Writing</b>	<b>October 22 - November 2, 2012</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>PSSA Standalone Writing Field Test</b>	<b>February 4-15, 2013</b>	<b>3-5</b>
<b>PSSA Writing</b>	<b>March 11-15, 2013</b>	<b>5 , 8</b>
<b>Writing Make-Ups</b>	<b>March 18-22, 2013</b>	<b>As Needed</b>
<b>PSSA Math and Reading</b>	<b>April 8-19, 2013</b>	<b>3-8</b>



PSSA Science	April 22-26, 2013	4, 8
Math, Reading and Science Make-Ups	April 29-May 3, 2013	As Needed
PASA Math and Reading	February 18-March 29, 2013	3–8
PASA Science	May 6-May 31, 2013	4, 8
ACCESS for ELLs	January 28-March 8, 2013	K – 12
NAEP (in selected schools)	January 28-March 8, 2013	4,8,12

*(Note: Make-ups may be administered throughout the window.)*

*The PSSA dates for the spring administrations are selected in an effort to avoid conflict with as many spring breaks and other major activities as possible.*

## C. Test Format

### *Common Items, Equating Block Items, and Field Test Items*

There are several different forms of the PSSA, which means that students may not all be taking the exact same test. Each form has **common items**, **equating block items**, and **field test items**. The common items appear on each form for every student to complete; these common items are considered the *core* of the test. Only common items are used to determine student, school and district performance levels (including meeting AYP).

Equating items vary on forms. The equating items are used to link one year’s grade level test with the previous year’s grade level test. The equating block items are not used to determine student, school and district performance levels (including AYP).

Field test items are embedded in all test forms. The field test items are new items that are administered under the same conditions as operational items and are used to gather statistical information about the field test items, but do not contribute to calculating performance levels or AYP. The Department collects information about every test question by field testing it before it is used as a common or equating block item. Field test items may appear on future forms of the PSSA.

Because Pennsylvania wants students to do their best on **all** items, students and teachers will not be able to distinguish which items on the test are common, equating block, or field test. *Students must respond to each section of a test to receive a score.*

### *Introduction of the Assessment Anchor Content Standards*

The next evolution of the PSSA came with the introduction of the [Assessment Anchor Content Standards](#) (commonly called the Assessment Anchors, or just the Anchors). The Assessment Anchors clarify the Academic Standards assessed on the PSSA and are designed to hold together, or “anchor,” the PSSA and the curriculum/instructional practices in schools. The

Assessment Anchors will better align curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices throughout the state. The Department of Education identified the Assessment Anchors based on the recommendations of teachers, curriculum experts involved in national organizations [e.g., the National Science teachers Association (NSTA), the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment (NCIEA), and the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP)], and other external groups serving on the various Assessment Anchor Committees.

Like the Academic Standards, the Anchors will be reviewed periodically to ensure they represent the most important skills and knowledge that should be assessed on the PSSA.

## **D. Linking the PSSA to Classroom Practice**

The PSSA is designed to improve instruction—focusing lessons on students’ learning needs, deepening rigor, and modeling clear expectations. The Department supports the use of multiple assessments and the development of a curriculum that goes beyond just meeting the Assessment Anchors.

The PDE introduced two strategies to help educators align their curriculum and instructional practices to the Assessment Anchors: *Anchors- in-Practice* and *Adopt-an-Anchor*. This section describes these strategies and summarizes their success in schools across the Commonwealth. Intermediate Units can be contacted for more information or further training on these strategies.

### ***Knowing Your Students***

The PSSA measures student progress and provides evidence that holds all stakeholders accountable for student learning. The PDE also views the PSSA as an important tool for decision-making. The PSSA and classroom assessments provide information about students’ strengths and weaknesses, and allow teachers to monitor progress throughout the school year. The PSSA provides an annual snapshot, and the classroom assessments provide more frequent samples of student progress. Student data help teachers and administrators:

- Align instruction and curriculum to student needs.
- Make appropriate instructional choices.
- Provide appropriate support.
- Select appropriate materials and programs.
- Focus on how students learn.

### ***Professional Development***

Quality professional development helps teachers grow individually and as a team. It is paramount in building a professional community focused on student learning. To meet the challenge of educating all students, teachers should have the following:

- Ongoing, on-site professional development and opportunities to learn, share, and discuss the work of teaching.
- Recognition of both collective and individual teachers’ professional needs and strengths.

- A thorough understanding of the Assessment Anchors, how they are translated into practice, and also what grade-level proficiency looks like.
- Opportunities to plan, design, teach, evaluate, and score student work together.

The link between student achievement and effective teaching has been well documented. Among the indicators (e.g., student work, district assessments), the PSSA provides insight into the areas in which teaching and learning should be strengthened and supported—across the district, in schools, in classrooms and for the individual student. District and school leadership should use the Assessment Anchors and PSSA scores to help guide them in choosing professional development opportunities.

## 1. Anchors-in-Practice

Adapted from the Education Trust’s Standards in Practice, *Anchors-in-Practice* focuses on professional development and teacher training. The model is designed to elicit discussion about the alignment among the Anchors, the PSSA, and classroom practice. A more complete version is available on the Education Trust website at [www.edtrust.org](http://www.edtrust.org).

### *Getting Started*

To facilitate this exercise, copies of the Assessment Anchors and one of the following will be needed: an assignment or problem (preferably a short one), a PSSA released task, or a released task from a similar test. The exercise should be facilitated with teams of teachers to prompt discussion and begin to align individual expectations, understanding, and work.

**Step One:** Complete the assignment or key parts of it.

**Step Two:** Analyze the assignment for its expectations. List the content and skills the students must draw on or know to complete the assignment. Demands should be embedded in the directions and the actual task.

**Step Three:** Match the expectations to the Anchor(s) that best align(s) with the assignment. Look for the Anchor at the grade level that best describes the skills and content inherent in the assignment. Try to prioritize the Anchors if there is more than one. (If there are no Anchors that match or if the Anchor match is at a lower or higher grade, discuss the implications. If so, rewrite the assignment to be grade appropriate and align with the grade Anchor.)

A fourth step can be added if time allows:

**Step Four:** Using the list of expectations and the language in the Anchor(s), write a statement of “proficiency” that relates to what students must do and demonstrate in their work to receive a passing grade.

Working with *Anchors-In-Practice* helps teachers realize how expectations differ and how assignments are not always aligned to the most essential skills and knowledge represented in the Assessment Anchors.

## **2. Adopt-an-Anchor**

[Adopt-an-Anchor](#) is one of many tools that the Department of Education has developed to help schools and districts better understand the Assessment System and how it links to quality teaching and learning. *Adopt-an-Anchor* is designed specifically to support teachers and leaders in schools and districts in making solid decisions about using the Pennsylvania Assessment Anchor Content Standards to drive high-quality, aligned instruction across the curriculum. All students need to refine and practice their academic skills. As curriculum becomes more demanding and materials become more complex, application of these skills can be difficult even for proficient students. Thus, all students need more time and experience applying their academic skills. Middle and high school students who struggle must be given ample opportunity to strengthen their skills. This can happen if other departments and their staff “adopt” carefully matched Anchors from the Pennsylvania Assessment Anchor Content Standards documents. The *Adopt-An-Anchor* strategy seeks to achieve the following:

- Familiarize staff with the Assessment Anchor Content Standards and the Academic Standards.
- Deepen the instructional experiences in various subject areas.
- Allow staff to share responsibility of teaching essential skills.

*Adopt-an-Anchor* first identifies Anchors that are appropriate for each department and/or course. Teachers then “adopt” one or more Anchor(s), accepting responsibility for teaching all students the knowledge and skills related to the chosen Anchor(s). Thus, staff that adopt Anchors agree to strategically teach and assess student learning on these selected Anchors until students perform well on these Anchors as measured by PSSA-like assessments. While the instructional strategies may vary with the subject, and assessment of proficiency may take many forms, staff who adopt Anchors agree to teach students the content and skills needed to be proficient on state assessments. The key to this strategy is selecting Anchors that are appropriate for specific subjects and/or courses, and then to accept responsibility for teaching students to be proficient, as the Anchors will be assessed on the PSSA.

## **3. Tips for Success**

Some schools have found that the following strategies improve student achievement in Science, Writing, Reading and Mathematics.

### **Elementary**

Teach these content areas and related skills beginning in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten.

- Diagnose student instructional needs to provide appropriate instruction. This includes a careful analysis of content areas, sub-populations, and problem-solving skills.
- Use pedagogical methods common throughout the school so the students can easily move from one classroom to another and apply the same skills. All teachers should carefully review the Assessment Anchors and make sure that

what they are teaching is vertically articulated. They should also review the math and reading content within a given year to make sure that the curriculum sequence is compatible with the PSSA. All other teachers should make sure that they are incorporating the content appropriate for their area as defined by the Assessment Anchor Content Standards. They could employ the *Adopt-an-Anchor* or *Anchors-in-Practice* strategy to accomplish this. A recent TIMSS study dealt with pedagogy in addition to student performance.

- Adopt a systemic approach, either through a common program or a textbook series. The approach should be research-based.
- Use lessons that focus on developing children’s vocabulary and engaging students in developing a vocabulary handbook. (Teachers can print out the [Assessment Anchor glossaries](#) for grades 3 – 8 found on the PDE website. These glossaries include vocabulary words and the definitions that may be used on the PSSA.)
- Use discussion-based techniques to clarify and model how to approach problems in a variety of ways and using a variety of strategies.
- Offer instruction on the proper use of the calculator as part of the students’ ongoing development of the use of technology in relation to science and mathematics.
- Focus professional development on the teaching of science, writing, reading and mathematics.
- Monitor student progress using a variety of methods, including those previously mentioned, as well as diagnostic classroom assessments, making judgments as to how a pupil is performing against a predetermined set of criteria.
- Incorporate problem-solving and open-ended questions into the curriculum throughout the year.
- Have staff work with students to develop scoring guidelines for open-ended problems so that they better understand the expectations.
- Have staff work with each other in developing scoring guidelines for open-ended problems so that there is a common expectation between teachers within a school.
- Provide students with time to solve open-ended problems individually, before sharing in small groups and discussing as a class.
- Have staff work with students to develop students’ understanding of the differences between the verbs used in open-ended items. Students should understand verbs such as “explain,” “describe,” and “identify.”

## Secondary

Many of the elementary suggestions also apply at the secondary level.

- Have all staff accept responsibility for teaching science, reading, writing and mathematical skills and monitoring progress.
- Diagnose student instructional needs at the secondary level in order to provide appropriate instruction. This includes a careful analysis of content areas, sub-populations, and problem-solving skills.
- Use data and other diagnostic methods to shape curriculum.

- Use data and diagnostic methods to know students, understand their proficiencies, and support and intervene where necessary.
- Provide professional development in the teaching of science, writing, reading and mathematics for all staff so that common strategies are used in core and elective classes.
- Offer professional development in how to make adaptations for special needs students and other special categories, such as ELL students.
- Partner all content areas.
- Plan and articulate a rich curriculum.
- The PSSA should not be the only source for guidance. The Nation’s Report Card, The International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), the American College Testing Program (ACT), the National Assessment for Educational Progress, (NAEP), and other district sponsored standardized or locally developed tests should also be used.

## E. Cut Scores

The performance level cut scores are presented in the tables below.

Math Scaled Score Ranges by Performance Level and Grade							
Performance Level	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8	
Advanced	NA	1355 and up	1373 and up	1380 and up	1363 and up	1394 and up	
Proficient	NA	1275 – 1355	1275 – 1373	1275 – 1380	1275 – 1363	1275 – 1394	
Basic	NA	1150 – 1274	1150 – 1274	1150 – 1274	1150 – 1274	1150 – 1274	
Below Basic	NA	1075 – 1149	1075 – 1149	1075 – 1149	1075 – 1149	1075 – 1149	

Reading Scaled Score Ranges by Performance Level and Grade							
Performance Level	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8	
Advanced	1442 and up	1469 and up	1497 and up	1456 and up	1470 and up	1473 and up	
Proficient	1235 – 1441	1255 – 1468	1275 – 1496	1278 – 1455	1279 – 1469	1280 – 1472	
Basic	1168 – 1234	1112 – 1254	1137 – 1274	1121 – 1277	1131 – 1278	1146 – 1279	
Below Basic	1000 – 1167	700 – 1111	700 – 1136	700 – 1120	700 – 1130	700 – 1145	

Science Scaled Score Ranges by Performance Level and Grade			
Performance Level	Grade 5	Grade 8	
Advanced	1483 and up	1464 and up	
Proficient	1275 – 1482	1275 – 1463	
Basic	1150 – 1274	1150 – 1274	
Below Basic	1050 – 1149	925 – 1149	

Writing Scaled Score Ranges by Performance Level and Grade			
Performance Level	Grade 5	Grade 8	
Advanced	1909 and up	1748 and up	
Proficient	1236 – 1908	1236 – 1747	
Basic	745 – 1235	914 – 1235	
Below Basic	700 – 744	700 – 913	

## F. Complete Responses

Scorers cannot infer understanding from student responses. **All responses to the test questions must be answered according to the directions.** If part of a test question asks for a written example of the reason something is done, then a computation or formula alone will not meet the requirements of a complete response. See the open-ended examples in the [Item and Scoring Samplers](#) on the PDE web site.

## G. The Use of Highlighters on the PSSA

- Students may use highlighter pens during the test sessions to highlight text in the passages and items. Only highlighter pens may be used; other types of felt-tip marking pens may **not** be used. No specific brand of highlighter is required. Avoid dark pink; yellow is best.
- Students **must** mark their responses to questions using a No. 2 pencil.
- Students should be instructed never to use a highlighter in the same place that they used a pencil. Do not allow students to highlight pencil marks of any kind, including filled-in bubbles or students' handwriting. The highlighters may cause pencil marks to blur or bleed.
- Do not allow students to highlight barcodes, preslugged bubbles, or any other marks or printing around the edges of the scannable document. The highlighters may cause the ink used for these purposes to blur and bleed.

## Part Three: Writing Content

### A. Overview of the PSSA Writing Test

As part of the State assessment system required by Chapter 4 of the Pennsylvania School Code, a writing assessment is administered annually in grades 5 and 8. In compliance with §4.51(b)(3 and 4) of the Pennsylvania School Code, the State Board of Education approved the following requirement: “Performance on State writing assessments shall be demonstrated by the quality of students’ written compositions on a variety of topics and modes of writing.”

The performance levels reflect students’ attainment of the following academic standards (Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking): 1.4. Types of Writing and 1.5. Quality of Writing.

#### *Alternate Writing Test*

There is no state alternate assessment in writing. Special education students who have significant cognitive disabilities must participate in an alternate school-entity-provided assessment. This assessment must meet the individual needs of the student(s) and must be filed in the student record.

Special education students who do not meet the criteria for significant cognitive disabilities must participate in the regular PSSA Writing Test with appropriate accommodations.

#### **About the test**

The 2012-2013 Writing PSSA test has four sections. Section one is multiple choice with a focus on conventions. Sections two, three, and four are open-ended responses with two common writing prompts and one field test writing prompt in each form. The following bullets describe important aspects of the test design.

- **Assessing Grades 5 and 8.** The writing assessment is administered to students in Grades 5 and 8.
- **Testing Window.** The Writing Assessments are administered in the spring. The testing window for 2013 is March 11-15.
- **Emphasis on Persuasive and Informational Writing at Grade 8.** The Writing Assessment at grade 8 includes only the persuasive and informational modes. The Writing Assessment at grade 5 requires students to respond to either two or all three of the modes (narrative, informational, persuasive). The Grade 8 Writing PSSA better aligns the assessment to the expository forms of writing most often used in the middle and high school curriculum. Also, by emphasizing expository writing in the middle and high school years, the assessment reflects the expectations for writing that occur in post-secondary classrooms and in the workplace.
- **Multiple-Choice Items in the Writing Assessment.** The Writing PSSA includes multiple-choice items intended to assess students’ skills in revising and editing (using the conventions of language and writing). Multiple-choice items allow for a more valid



conventions score, which includes revising and editing, and account for a small percentage of the overall test.

- **Mode-Specific Scoring Guidelines.** The Writing PSSA uses a mode-specific scoring guideline to score each prompt. The domain rubric used in the past is an excellent tool for teaching; however, this rubric is limited for scoring shorter, on-demand written responses. Because PSSA writing samples are students’ first drafts, it is more appropriate to score them using specific criteria for an on-demand response. The mode-specific scoring guidelines identify the most essential qualities of the mode of writing and the specific prompt related to the core areas of writing: focus, content, organization, and style.
- **Conventions Scoring Guidelines.** Conventions of writing – sentence formation, grammar, usage, spelling, punctuation – are scored with a separate scoring guideline. Eighty percent of the student’s total score relates to the mode-specific scoring guideline, and 20% relates to the combined score of the conventions scoring guideline and the multiple-choice revising and editing items.
- **Alignment to the Standards.** The two writing standards of the Academic Standards for Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening, 1.4 and 1.5, are still included on the assessment, but the Department of Education has tightened the focus of what is assessed and at which grade level.

**Overview of the Academic Standards Measured**

Grade	Standard 1.4 A Narrative	Standard 1.4 B Informational	Standard 1.4 C Persuasive	Standard 1.5 (A-G) Conventions
5	X	X	X	X
8		X	X	X
11		X	X	X

- **Rigor.** The 2012-2013 PSSA maintains rigor and focuses the assessment on the modes most used in schools, in post-secondary education, and in the workplace.
- **Focusing on the Domains.** All of the domains discussed in the Pennsylvania Academic Standards are assessed at some point in the Writing Assessments.

## B. Test Highlights

This section describes some basic information about the Writing PSSA, including the test design for 2012-2013, test format, and the types of prompts and multiple-choice items that appear on the test.

### *Test Design for 2012-2013*

The Writing Assessment in grades 5 and 8 requires each student to respond to three prompts and includes 20 stimulus-based multiple-choice items.

### *2012-2013 Writing Field Test, Grades 3-5*

A standalone writing field test will take place February 4-February 15, 2013. Grade 3 will have 18 language skills multiple choice items, 4 application of language skills short answer items, and 1 essay (composition) prompt. Grades 4-5 will have 24 language skills multiple choice items and 1 writing (composition) prompt).

For more specific information including samples, see the Getting Ready presentation for 2012-2013 and other related documents at the Assessment webpage on the PDE website.

### *Scoring*

The students' responses to prompts are scored considering both the five domains (focus, content, organization, style, and conventions) and a four-point scale with mode-specific scoring guidelines. The papers are given two scores by a single reader: one for mode and one for conventions. The readers are trained to give the composite score first, then the conventions. The possible score for the two writing prompts using the four-point mode-specific scoring guide (eight total points) is weighted to equal 80 points. The possible four-point conventions score for each of the two prompts (eight total points) is combined with the 12 common revising and editing multiple-choice items for a total of 20 points. The total score (possible 100) is a combination of the composition score (possible 80) plus the conventions score (possible 20). Performance Level Descriptors were developed prior to the statistical standard-setting procedures that took place in the spring of 2006. All prompts and multiple-choice items have gone through the field testing process and have been reviewed by teams of highly skilled Pennsylvania educators.

Non-scorable and off-prompt responses will not receive a composition score. Off-prompt responses still receive a conventions score.

### **SCORING CHART for GRADES 5 and 8**

#### **(Holistic) Focus, Content, Organization, Style Domains**

Points per 4-point <b>Mode-specific</b> Scoring Guide for writing prompts	<b>Total Number of Composition Points</b> (2 Prompts Each Scored with 4-point <b>Mode-specific</b> Scoring Guide multiplied by 10)
2 prompts @ 4 points each	8 x 10 = <b>80</b>

#### **Conventions Domain**

Points per 4-point Conventions Scoring Guide for writing prompts	<u>Common</u> multiple-choice <b>Revising and Editing</b> Items (12 core items; 8 embedded matrix or field test items)	<b>Total Number of Conventions Points</b> (2 Prompts Each Scored with 4 point Conventions Scoring Guide + 12 core Multiple-choice Conventions)
2 prompts @ 4 pts. each	12 MC items @ 1 pt. each	$8 + 12 = 20$

### Total Number of Points for Writing

(80 Composition points + 20 Conventions points)	$80 + 20 = 100$
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**In other words, 80% of a student’s score is based on Focus, Content, Organization, and Style, and 20% of a student’s score is based on Conventions.**

Note: Non-scorable and off-prompt responses do not receive a composition score; however, off-prompt responses do receive a conventions score.

Non-scorable responses:

- Illegible; i.e., includes so many indecipherable words that no sense can be made of the response
- Incoherent; i.e., words are legible but syntax is so garbled that response makes no sense
- Insufficient; i.e., does not include enough to assess domains adequately
- Blank paper
- Language other than English

Off-prompt:

- Is readable but did not respond to prompt

### *Length of Testing Time*

The PSSA measures students’ ability to meet the State Standards, no matter how much time it takes them to do so. In that sense, the PSSA is not a timed test, and **all students** get extra time if they need it. There are, however, certain conditions that teachers must observe to give students extra time. These guidelines are described in the assessment [Administration Manuals](#) and the [Accommodations Guidelines](#). The most important condition is that any extra time must come immediately after the testing period and not after lunch and/or the next day. In general, the estimated time to administer each writing test is as follows:

Grade Level	Number of Test Sessions	Approximate Total Testing Time*
Grade 5	4 sessions	210 min. to 255 min.

Grade 8	4 sessions	210 min. to 255 min.

\* All students are entitled to extra time as needed.

### ***Types of Questions***

The Writing PSSA has both multiple-choice items and open-ended prompts. The multiple-choice items, however, account for a small percentage of the overall writing test. The multiple-choice questions are worth one point and the open-ended prompts are worth 1 to 4 points for the composition score and 1 to 4 points for the conventions score. The writing test includes the following numbers and types of questions:

Grade	Test Format
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4 sessions</li> <li>• 12 common multiple-choice conventions items (included in scores)</li> <li>• 8 embedded field test multiple-choice conventions items</li> <li>• Two common prompts from any of the three modes (narrative, informational, persuasive)</li> <li>• 2 lined pages for each prompt</li> </ul>
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4 sessions</li> <li>• 12 common multiple-choice conventions items (included in scores)</li> <li>• 8 embedded field test multiple-choice conventions items</li> <li>• Two common prompts (one each from informational and persuasive)</li> <li>• One field test prompt from either informational or persuasive</li> <li>• 3 lined pages for each grade 8 prompt</li> </ul>

## **WHEN ADMINISTERING THE PSSA, TEACHERS SHOULD REMIND STUDENTS:**

- To look back into the passage for some multiple-choice items**
- To note underlined words in the items**
- To read all answer choices carefully before selecting one**
- To write only within the lined pages**
- To use strategies for planning, organizing and reviewing their writing**

### ***Testing Environment***

- Maintain a positive, calm atmosphere and help students approach the assessment in a positive manner.

- Arrange student seating to prevent sharing of answers.
- Posters and charts displaying specific writing-related information should not be displayed during testing. As examples, Editing Charts, Word Wall Lists, and Revision Posters should be covered if they are on the walls of a testing room. In general, anything that might assist students with the writing process should not appear in a classroom-testing situation.
- Icons or pictures used as visual cues may **NOT** be displayed during testing.

### ***General Testing Information***

- Students are **NOT** permitted to use a dictionary, thesaurus, or spell/grammar checker for the writing assessment.
- Students **MAY** draw a graphic organizer, e.g. a web or a Venn diagram, on a blank sheet of scratch paper.
- Students may **NOT** use any pre-printed graphic organizer.
- Students **MAY** use an **original copy** of the *Mode-specific PSSA Scoring Guidelines*. Original copies of the guidelines are included in this handbook and may be duplicated for distribution to students for use during classroom instruction and the assessment.

## **C. Linking the PSSA to Classroom Practice**

The PSSA should be used to help improve instruction—focusing lessons on students’ learning needs, deepening rigor, and modeling clear expectations. There are times when, because of a school’s performance or a sub-population’s performance, an increased emphasis should be placed on a particular standard to best meet the needs of all students for PSSA. The Department supports the use of multiple assessments and the development of a curriculum that infuses writing across all content areas.

The Standards Aligned System and the voluntary curriculum framework for literacy support teachers in developing a rich writing program to help students acquire the comfort and confidence they need to become effective writers. An effective writing curriculum requires students to read and write extensively. While teaching the writing process and writing workshop continue to be critical components of effective classroom practice, it is evident that “balanced” instruction is the goal for classroom practice. The writing process involves modeling, practicing, editing, and revising compositions. The writing process also allows students access to the act of composing. The writing workshop provides a platform for modeling clear expectations and focused instruction on the strategies of good writers.

The Pennsylvania Writing Project Network (PWPEN) supports teachers as they prepare their students to meet state standards. Teachers work with teachers to develop best practices that ensure that every child succeeds. The PWPEN site linked to each of the eight different state areas can be found at <http://www2.lv.psu.edu/ce/pwpen/>.

## **What Successful Schools Are Doing**

Improving writing achievement requires a systematic approach that involves students in the technical skills of writing while continuing to emphasize fluency and personal expression. The following strategies improve student achievement in writing:

### ***Elementary***

- Teach emergent writing skills as early as pre-kindergarten and kindergarten.
- Diagnose student instructional needs and find ways to provide appropriate instruction.
- Adopt common pedagogical methods so that students can easily move from one classroom to another and apply the same skills.
- Use a systematic approach through the writing process.
- Give students time in class (and out) to:
  - Plan
  - Think
  - Write
  - Confer
  - Read
  - Change their minds
  - Write some more
- Plan and articulate a rich literacy program that requires students to read and write extensively.
- Plan for students to generate content and topics for writing on a daily basis.
- Writing needs to take place across the curriculum in a variety of forms:
  - Journals
  - Learning logs
  - Writer's notebooks
  - Double-entry journals
  - Dialogue journals
- Model good writing and reading habits.
- Teach writing as a staged recursive process.
- Use quality children's literature.
- Read aloud to students.
- Allow independent reading and writing time.
- Stress higher-order thinking skills.
- Coach.
- Use authentic purposes supported by:
  - Whole-group brainstorming
  - Small-group response session
  - Peer- or teacher-conferences
  - Collaborative writing
  - Workshops of writing-in-progress
  - Read-arounds of finished work
- Focus professional development on the teaching of writing.

### ***Secondary***

- Have all staff accept responsibility for teaching writing skills and monitoring progress.
- Have all subject areas address writing inside their content and curricula.
- Use data and diagnostic methods to know students, to gain an understanding of their writing proficiencies, and to find ways to support and intervene where necessary.
- Provide professional development in teaching writing for all staff and using common strategies in core and elective classes.
- Partner reading with writing.
- Link writing and study skills, including taking notes and summarizing texts.
- Have students use writing as a means for gaining understanding of complex ideas, points of view, and positions in subject content areas.
- Move teaching among all three modes (narrative, informational, and persuasive), always stretching students' minds and interests.
- Engage students in discussions about what they've written and what engaged them in those writings.
- Have students compose a point of view with a defense (written discussions).
- Engage students in functional writing by:
  - Writing a resume and cover letter
  - Completing various types of forms
  - Recording activities, experiences, interests, honors
  - Writing friendly letters
  - Writing business letters
  - Creating advertisements
  - Creating web pages
  - Producing manuals
  - Writing contracts
  - Creating pamphlets
  - Writing memos

### **Classroom Instruction**

The Pennsylvania Writing Assessment Mode-Specific and Conventions Scoring Guidelines address the five characteristics (domains) of effective writing in a format that is useful for on-demand assessments. It is important to remember that the state writing assessment provides a snapshot of a student's overall effectiveness as a writer. It also provides useful information for school-wide and district-wide curriculum planning as well as instructional improvement discussions and planning.

Embedding test writing into daily classroom instruction and planning writing workshop activities provide the best means to prepare students for tests.

The Department recognizes that, although the PSSA scoring guidelines are appropriate for assessing on-demand student writing, they may not provide enough detailed information for daily classroom instruction. Educators may find it useful to evaluate their students' writing at the classroom level by scoring each domain separately. This information can provide the teacher with criteria to form guided writing groups as well as provide individual interventions.

**REMEMBER: CLASSROOM WRITING SHOULD REMAIN FOCUSED ON GOOD INSTRUCTION!**

### **Description of the Domains**

The **Domain of Focus**, the single controlling point made with an awareness of task (type) about a specific topic, involves three essential features of a response:

1. The writer should clearly address the topic.
2. The writer should make an assertion about that topic. Usually the assertion takes the form of a thesis statement; however, the assertion may also be strongly implied.
3. The writer should write to respond to the specific prompt, not only in subject-matter but in mode.

The **Domain of Content**, development presents ideas developed through facts, examples, anecdotes, details, opinions, statistics, reasons and explanations:

1. The writer should support assertions with relevant details, explanations, definitions, evidence, anecdotes, etc. that support his/her main idea.
2. The writer should “show” the reader, not “tell.”

The **Domain of Organization**, the order developed and sustained within and across paragraphs:

1. The writer should include an introduction and a conclusion.
2. The writer should arrange content in an appropriate and logical order. The arrangement may be marked by transitional devices within and between paragraphs and should support an underlying functional pattern, e.g., logical, spatial, chronological.
3. The writer should use transitional devices.

The **Domain of Style** reflects the choice, use and arrangement of words and sentence structure that create tone and voice:

1. The writer should use specific language and sentence structure to develop a voice and tone consistent with the focus of the writer’s response.
2. The writer should demonstrate an awareness of audience.

The **Domain of Conventions** includes grammar, mechanics, spelling, usage, and sentence formation:

1. The writer should demonstrate evident control of these conditions.

## **D. Understanding the Modes**

### **NARRATIVE**

Narrative writing is both a mode and a form of content. As a mode, a narrative involves the re-creation of an incident or event – real or imagined – in order to make a point. As content, a narrative takes the form of anecdotes (brief stories) used to illustrate a writer’s point. This explanation considers narrative as a mode, but this does not preclude the importance of teaching middle and high school students to use narrative as content that supports informational or persuasive writing.

The word “narrative” implies a “narrator” – an individual voice recounting what happened from a particular point of view. In narrative essays, this is usually the point of view of the writer himself or herself.



The purpose of writing a narrative is to describe an incident or event that was meaningful to the writer. The meaning is the “So what?” of the story. In other words, “This is what happened, and here is why it was important.” The point the writer wants to make by way of the story (in domain terms, its focus) remains clear whether the narrative is fictional or a first-person account of an actual event.

The content of a narrative consists of real or imagined acts of nature and/or people, words spoken, emotions felt in a particular place and time. Its organization is chronological, sometimes in a straight timeline fashion, sometimes with flashbacks or foreshadowing. Stylistically, the words and sentence structures of a narrative create a mood/tone that enhances the exciting, sad, suspenseful, joyful or other nature of the experience.

Because the narrator/writer wants the reader to vicariously share the experience of the event, s/he will “show” rather than simply tell the story. Narrators don’t just *tell* what happened; they *recreate* experience, real or imagined. This means they show what people did; show people speaking; even show the thoughts running through people’s minds. In other words, narrators recount what we think of as scenes, which means they have to set the scene (implementing setting, plot, characterization, dialogue, conflict, etc.) In sum, narrators recreate scenes so that readers can vicariously experience what happened even though they weren’t present themselves.

But why would a narrator go to all that trouble? Why recreate what happened in such detail? Why not just summarize, providing the information in a just-the-facts, reporter-like manner? Most importantly, because the specifics of what happened matter to the writer. It matters what those people did, said, and thought. There’s a point to this story. It might be a lesson or a moral; it might be a new insight or understanding; it might represent a turning point in the writer’s life. Why does it matter how a ten-year-old survived a snowstorm that blocked her parents’ routes home from work, leaving only Gatorade, an iPod, and a pet turtle to keep her company after the power went off? Why does it matter that an eleventh grader made dinner for his ill grandmother, even though it was just packaged macaroni and cheese, the only dish he knew how to prepare? Because these are meaningful events to the people involved, and conveying that meaning is the reason for writing a narrative.

So what are the features of narrative writing?

- A single narrator’s voice and point of view (usually that of the writer)
- A single event or series of events being recreated in chronological order
- Details (which may or may not be facts) of setting, action, speech, and thought that make up that one event
- Words, sentence structures, and literary devices that create a tone and mood appropriate to the event
- A “So what?” for the reader to understand.

## **INFORMATIONAL**

Consider these prompts: (1) A terrible storm hit your town. Tell what happened. (2) Think about a time you spent with a good friend or favorite relative. Write a story that tells what happened.

Variations on both of these have been used to prompt narrative writing for PSSA and provided the source of examples for the discussion of narrative on page 27. Now consider the topics implicit in each of these prompts: (1) terrible storms and (2) important personal relationships.

These same topics could provide informational prompts: (1) Storms can be terrible. Explain what makes stormy weather so threatening. Or (2) Relationships with people we care about are important in our lives. Explain the features of a good relationship and how it can affect your life.

What's the difference between the narrative and informational versions of the same topics? First, and most important, the narrative version of each prompt asks specifically "What happened?" As discussed on page 27, recreating what was done, said, and thought is the essence of narrative.

The informational version, however, focuses on *explaining* an event or experience that has happened before and will almost surely happen again. It does not mean reviewing or recounting a single event. It means analyzing what a certain event entails, i.e., selecting the aspects or features of what happens when a storm strikes or a relationship develops, and explaining what such events often entail. For example, terrible storms physically damage property, physically and emotionally damage people, economically damage individuals and whole regions, cause insecurity about the future, and so on. (In fact, these features could be brainstormed to cover an entire blackboard thereby creating a rich set of possible directions an informative piece of writing could go.)

Second, once the topic has been analyzed into its aspects, features, or parts, a writer must decide which to explain and how. For example, the writer of a "terrible storm" informational essay might decide to write about property damage, physical-body damage, and emotional damage. She might describe the property damage done in New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina if she knows the specific facts and details of that event. Or she might describe the damage done to her own home in a storm her family experienced. In either case, she'd be choosing an example – New Orleans or her house – and providing the specific facts and details that illustrate property damage in the chosen place. The same kind of example (or anecdote) selection would be necessary to develop the idea of physical-body damage, and the same process would be repeated to explain emotional damage.

This means the same content can be used in informational writing and in narrative writing. In informational writing, however, these descriptive details and facts develop and support particular assertions made by the writer ("Storms can cause damage such as this") while in narrative writing they develop and support the story as a whole ("This is what happened to me and why it mattered to me.").

When the writer has decided what the content of her essay will be, she needs to be sure she knows what point she wants to make. Is her point that acts of nature are never neutral? Is it that acts of nature harm people in more ways than most realize? Is it that while we live in a society that allows us to think we control the world in which we live, nature remains more powerful than we are? Whatever her point (focus), it will determine which content to include and which to omit.

Third, once content has been developed and focus chosen, the writer must decide in what order those developed explanations will most effectively make her point. If the point is about the predominantly negative impact of acts of nature, the most meaningful order might move from the most easily repaired damage (e.g., property) to the more difficult repairs (e.g., people's bodies), to the most difficult repairs (e.g., people's hope for the future.). This, too, is unlike the process of developing a narrative, for while the order of ideas may be chronological (e.g., the kinds of damage people deal with first followed by the kinds they deal with second and last), informational writing often requires a more analytically challenging order if the organization is to contribute to the meaning/point of the paper. In this case, the order of details would be emphatic, moving from least to most important.

Finally, while narrative writing requires a style that recreates the personal mood or tone of the story being told, informational writing requires a style that reflects a more objective voice and attitude.

So what are the features of informational writing?

- A single writer's voice and point of view on a topic
- A single point being made through content organized in a way that meaningfully supports that point (which may or may not be chronological)
- Content that has been "sorted" into categories of ideas that explain the point through specific examples, anecdotes, details, facts and additional analysis that may include further explanation
- Words, sentence structures, and literary devices that create a tone appropriate to the point

## **PERSUASIVE**

Teachers and textbooks often present persuasive writing as different in all ways from narrative and informational writing. There are certain topics considered "persuasive," especially at the high school level, including controversial social issues like capital punishment, abortion, gun control, euthanasia, and school prayer. These might not be good essay topics for on-demand writing, however, because some students have neither the maturity nor the knowledge to write an on-demand response about such complex issues in effective ways. Even the drinking age and the military draft, though relevant to their lives, are not topics about which many students can write with any authority or substance in a no-research essay format. Instead, topics for persuasive essay writing, like those for narrative and informational essay writing should be those students know something about, care about and, ideally in a classroom setting, can choose themselves.

Good writing in each of the three modes requires the same features: a sharp, distinct, controlling point; substantial, specific, illustrative content; meaningful organization; and effective style. Similarly, there are no mode-topic constraints. Any topic to which students bring sufficient experience and knowledge can prompt narrative, informational, or persuasive writing – including terrible storms and important relationships.

"Storms" can lead to persuasive essays about what families should do to prepare themselves when dangerous weather is forecast or the case for snowstorms as more treat than threat. "Relationships" becomes an issue for persuasion when raised in terms of nominating someone

you know for an award or deciding whether role models are better found in popular culture or personal communities.

Asking students to turn an informational paper into a persuasive one requires that they consider how their purpose and point must change; what content is useful in both and what would differ; how the organization of the persuasive piece might compare or contrast with the informational one; and how the writing strategies and other stylistic features might change.

Focus, in persuasion, is much more clearly audience-linked. Who needs to be convinced that snowstorms are a gift or a particular teacher is an award-worthy role model? Is the writer's goal that his readers think and/or act differently? The answers to those questions determine how a persuasive point should be stated and what it can reasonably include.

The content of a persuasive paper must also be audience-appropriate. The joy of snowball fights, which could support "the treat of snow" in an informational paper, is not likely to change the mind of an adult who envisions bloody noses or broken windows. To include that reason in a persuasive essay for some adults, a writer would have to describe loosely packed snow harmlessly falling around someone's face. More effectively, that reason should be replaced by the joy of making snow angels, illustrated by the small, medium, and large ones the writer and his older/younger siblings made in their backyard, bringing smiles to their parents' faces.

The content of a persuasive paper, like that in an informational one, should be organized to help make the writer's point. Perhaps a reader might best be persuaded of the joy of snow if the writer dismisses the most common reasons in the introduction and turns them into less obvious, more family and community-oriented ones as s/he moves through the body of the paper. The joy of snow can become the ways in which it provides time and opportunity for children, families, and neighbors – in that order – to get to know each other better and build community.

Because persuasive writing is more explicitly audience-oriented than narrative or informational, its style may more directly address its readers. Rhetorical questions, second-person pronouns, and explicit calls to action may be more appropriate and more effective in convincing a reader than in explaining something to him. Tone appropriate to the audience as well as to the topic is important here as well.

So what are the features of persuasive writing?

- A single writer's voice and point of view on an issue
- A single point being argued through content organized in a way that meaningfully supports that point (which may or may not be chronological)
- Content that has been "sorted" into reasons that support the argument through specific examples, anecdotes, details, facts and additional analysis that may include further explanation
- Words, sentence structures, and rhetorical devices that create a tone appropriate to the point and to the audience

## **E. Acknowledgements/Credits**

Dr. Andrea Fishman, Director of the PA Writing and Literature Project at West Chester University and the PA Writing Project Network of the National Writing Project]

Standards Aligned System for Literacy

<http://www.pdesas.org/>

## F. Scoring Guidelines/Sample Answer Sheet

### WRITING

#### PSSA CONVENTIONS SCORING GUIDELINE

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4

- Thorough control of sentence formation.
  - Few errors, if any, are present in grammar, usage, spelling, and punctuation, but the errors that are present do not interfere with meaning.
- 

3

- Adequate control of sentence formation.
  - Some errors may be present in grammar, usage, spelling, and punctuation, but few, if any, of the errors that are present may interfere with meaning.
- 

2

- Limited and/or inconsistent control of sentence formation. Some sentences may be awkward or fragmented.
  - Many errors may be present in grammar, usage, spelling, and punctuation, and some of those errors may interfere with meaning.
- 

1

- Minimal control of sentence formation. Many sentences are awkward and fragmented.
  - Many errors may be present in grammar, usage, spelling, and punctuation, and many of those errors may interfere with meaning.
-

## WRITING

### PSSA NARRATIVE SCORING GUIDELINE

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4	FOCUS	■ Sharp, distinct controlling point or theme with evident awareness of the narrative.
	CONTENT DEVELOPMENT	■ Strong story line with illustrative details that addresses a complex idea or examines a complex experience. Thoroughly elaborated narrative sequence that employs narrative elements as appropriate.
	ORGANIZATION	■ Skillful narrative pattern with clear and consistent sequencing of events, employing a beginning, a middle, and an end. Minor interruptions to the sequence may occur.
	STYLE	■ Precise control of language, literary devices, and sentence structures that creates a consistent and effective point of view and tone.

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3	FOCUS	■ Clear controlling point or theme with general awareness of the narrative.
	CONTENT DEVELOPMENT	■ Story line with details that addresses an idea or examines an experience. Sufficiently elaborated narrative sequence that employs narrative elements as appropriate.
	ORGANIZATION	■ Narrative pattern with generally consistent sequencing of events, employing a beginning, a middle, and an end. Interruptions to the sequence may occur.
	STYLE	■ Appropriate control of language, literary devices, and sentence structures that creates a consistent point of view and tone.

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2	FOCUS	■ Vague evidence of a controlling point or theme with inconsistent awareness of the narrative.
	CONTENT DEVELOPMENT	■ Inconsistent story line that inadequately addresses an idea or examines an experience. Insufficiently elaborated narrative sequence that may employ narrative elements.
	ORGANIZATION	■ Narrative pattern with generally inconsistent sequencing of events that may employ a beginning, a middle, and an end. Interruptions to the sequence may interfere with meaning.
	STYLE	■ Limited control of language and sentence structures that creates interference with point of view and tone.

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1	FOCUS	■ Little or no evidence of a controlling point or theme with minimal awareness of the narrative.
	CONTENT DEVELOPMENT	■ Insufficient story line that minimally addresses an idea or examines an experience. Unelaborated narrative that may employ narrative elements.
	ORGANIZATION	■ Narrative pattern with little or no sequencing of events. Interruptions to the sequence interfere with meaning.
	STYLE	■ Minimal control of language and sentence structures that creates an inconsistent point of view and tone.

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## WRITING

### PSSA INFORMATIONAL SCORING GUIDELINE

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4	FOCUS	Sharp, distinct controlling point made about a single topic with evident awareness of task and audience.
	CONTENT DEVELOPMENT	Substantial, relevant, and illustrative content that demonstrates a clear understanding of the purpose. Thorough elaboration with effectively presented information consistently supported with well-chosen details.
	ORGANIZATION	Effective organizational strategies and structures, such as logical order and transitions, which develop a controlling idea.
	STYLE	Precise control of language, stylistic techniques, and sentence structures that creates a consistent and effective tone.
3	FOCUS	Clear controlling point made about a single topic with general awareness of task and audience.
	CONTENT DEVELOPMENT	Adequate, specific, and/or illustrative content that demonstrates an understanding of the purpose. Sufficient elaboration with clearly presented information supported with well-chosen details.
	ORGANIZATION	Organizational strategies and structures, such as logical order and transitions, which develop a controlling idea.
	STYLE	Appropriate control of language, stylistic techniques, and sentence structures that creates a consistent tone.
2	FOCUS	Vague evidence of a controlling point made about a single topic with an inconsistent awareness of task and audience.
	CONTENT DEVELOPMENT	Inadequate, vague content that demonstrates a weak understanding of the purpose. Underdeveloped and/or repetitive elaboration with inconsistently supported information. May be an extended list.
	ORGANIZATION	Inconsistent organizational strategies and structures, such as logical order and transitions, which ineffectively develop a controlling idea.
	STYLE	Limited control of language and sentence structures that creates interference with tone.
1	FOCUS	Little or no evidence of a controlling point made about a single topic with a minimal awareness of task and audience.
	CONTENT DEVELOPMENT	Minimal evidence of content that demonstrates a lack of understanding of the purpose. Superficial, undeveloped writing with little or no support. May be a bare list.
	ORGANIZATION	Little or no evidence of organizational strategies and structures, such as logical order and transitions, which inadequately develop a controlling idea.
	STYLE	Minimal control of language and sentence structures that creates an inconsistent tone.

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**WRITING**  
**PSSA PERSUASIVE SCORING GUIDELINE**

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<b>4</b>	<b>FOCUS</b>	Sharp, distinct controlling point presented as a position and made convincing through a clear, thoughtful, and substantiated argument with evident awareness of task and audience.
	<b>CONTENT DEVELOPMENT</b>	Substantial, relevant, and illustrative content that demonstrates a clear understanding of the purpose. Thoroughly elaborated argument that includes a clear position consistently supported with precise and relevant evidence. Rhetorical (persuasive) strategies are evident.
	<b>ORGANIZATION</b>	Effective organizational strategies and structures, such as logical order and transitions, to develop a position supported with a purposeful presentation of content.
	<b>STYLE</b>	Precise control of language, stylistic techniques, and sentence structures that creates a consistent and effective tone.

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<b>3</b>	<b>FOCUS</b>	Clear controlling point presented as a position and made convincing through a credible and substantiated argument with general awareness of task and audience.
	<b>CONTENT DEVELOPMENT</b>	Adequate, specific and/or illustrative content that demonstrates an understanding of the purpose. Sufficiently elaborated argument that includes a clear position supported with some relevant evidence. Rhetorical (persuasive) strategies may be evident.
	<b>ORGANIZATION</b>	Organizational strategies and structures, such as logical order and transitions, to develop a position supported with sufficient presentation of content.
	<b>STYLE</b>	Appropriate control of language, stylistic techniques, and sentence structures that creates a consistent tone.

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<b>2</b>	<b>FOCUS</b>	Vague evidence of a controlling point presented as a position that may lack a credible and/or substantiated argument with an inconsistent awareness of task and audience.
	<b>CONTENT DEVELOPMENT</b>	Inadequate, vague content that demonstrates a weak understanding of the purpose. Insufficiently elaborated argument that includes an underdeveloped position supported with little evidence.
	<b>ORGANIZATION</b>	Inconsistent organizational strategies and structures, such as logical order and transitions, to develop a position with inadequate presentation of content.
	<b>STYLE</b>	Limited control of language and sentence structures that creates interference with tone.

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<b>1</b>	<b>FOCUS</b>	Little or no evidence of a controlling point presented as a position that lacks a credible and/or substantiated argument with minimal awareness of task and audience.
	<b>CONTENT DEVELOPMENT</b>	Minimal evidence of content that demonstrates a lack of understanding of the purpose. Unelaborated argument that includes an undeveloped position supported with minimal or no evidence.
	<b>ORGANIZATION</b>	Little or no evidence of organizational strategies and structures, such as logical order and transitions, to develop a position with insufficient presentation of content.
	<b>STYLE</b>	Minimal control of language and sentence structures that creates an inconsistent tone.

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## Part Four: Mathematics Content

### A. Overview of the 2011-2012 PSSA Mathematics Test

**Reporting Categories:** The Assessment Anchor Content Standards (Assessment Anchors, or Anchors) are organized into five reporting categories. These categories are similar to the five NCTM (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics) Standards and the five NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) Reporting Categories. PA Academic Standard Statements were examined and most were placed in the appropriate Reporting Categories. Some of the specific Standards cut across different Reporting Categories (e.g., 2.11- Concepts of Calculus, which occurs in different categories rather than being a separate category, 2.4 – Reasoning and Connections, and 2.5 – Problem solving and Communications).

Reporting Category	Standard
A. Numbers & Operations	2.1 Numbers 2.2 Computation
B. Measurement	2.3 Measurement
C. Geometry	2.9 Geometry 2.10 Trigonometry
D. Algebraic Concepts	2.8 Algebra
E. Data Analysis & Probability	2.6 Statistics & Data 2.7 Probability

**Multiple Choice Items:** In the PSSA Mathematics Assessment, all multiple-choice items have only one correct response choice, and the student is awarded one point for choosing it. For all multiple choice items students are provided with four choices.

**Item Specific Scoring Guidelines:** The Mathematics open-ended items are scored with item-specific scoring guidelines using a 0 - 4 point scale. *Note: The scoring guidelines do not equate with the four performance levels – Advanced, Proficient, Basic, and Below Basic. These performance levels describe a student’s overall performance on the PSSA and should not be confused with the point scale on the scoring guideline for open-ended items.*

**Scaffolding in Open-Ended Items:** The open-ended items are designed to take approximately 10-15 minutes. In general open-ended items are designed so that the skills needed to solve them get progressively more difficult. There are generally multiple entry points in the items as well. A student who has difficulty doing one part of the item can still “enter” the item at another part.

**Clarity on “Explain Why”:** The PSSA often asks students to explain their reasoning on the open-ended problems. Not all items will require students to explain their reasoning or thinking. Sometimes students are asked to “Explain why you did each step.” Other times they are asked to explain concepts or phenomena. Students should read the item very carefully and answer exactly what is being asked.

**Use of Calculators:** For the 2011-2012 PSSA, as in previous assessments, there will be a small number of non-calculator items, but these items will not be reported separately; there are too few of them to give a reliable score. The non-calculator items will be integrated into the reporting category **Numbers and Operations** and will still appear at the beginning of the PSSA. At all grades except grade 3, students will be permitted to use calculators on the remainder of the test.

A **Calculator Use** policy has been developed and was implemented beginning with the 2008-2009 PSSA. The policy is available on the PDE web page at

<http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt?open=18&objID=354429&mode=2>.

**Importance of Problem Solving:** Most of the multiple-choice items and all of the open-ended items require students to reason, solve problems, and show their knowledge about the content area being assessed. Even though Problem Solving is not one of the five content Reporting Categories, the PSSA still shows a separate score for the open-ended items on the school report that reflects students’ problem solving performance. **Note: The score of the open-ended items “counts” in the content it assesses (Geometry, etc).**

## B. Test Highlights

This section describes some basic information about the Mathematics PSSA including: the testing window, length of the test, test format, and types of questions that appear on the test.

### *Length of Testing Time*

The PSSA measures how well students have met Pennsylvania’s Academic Standards no matter how much time it takes them to complete the test. In that sense, the PSSA is not a timed test and **every student** gets extra time if needed. There are, however, certain conditions that test administrators must observe to give students extra time. These guidelines are described in the assessment administration manuals and the current version of the [Accommodations Guidelines](#). The most important condition is that any extra time must come immediately after the testing period and not after lunch and/or the next day. The only exceptions on spacing the test sessions are for students with such accommodations written into their IEP. In general, the estimated time to administer each Mathematics test is as follows:

<b>Approximate Administration Time 2011 - 2012 Mathematics PSSA Grades 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8.</b>			
<b>Section Number and Content</b>	<b>Approximate Total No. of Minutes Needed for Testing Session</b>	<b>No. of Minutes for Administrative Tasks Before and After Students Read and Respond to Test Questions</b>	<b>No. of Minutes for Students to Read and Respond to Test Questions</b>
1 Mathematics	70 to 85 mins.	15 to 20 mins.	55 to 65 mins.
3 Mathematics	65 to 80 mins.	15 to 20 mins.	50 to 60 mins.
5 Mathematics	65 to 80 mins.	15 to 20 mins.	50 to 60 mins.

### Types of Questions

The PSSA has both multiple-choice and open-ended items. Students need to know how to respond well to both types of items to maximize their score on the PSSA. The multiple-choice questions are worth one point and the open-ended questions are worth 0 - 4 points in Mathematics. The Mathematics test will include the following numbers and types of questions:

<b>2012 - 2013 PSSA Mathematics Test Format</b>									
			Number of Multiple-Choice Items Per Student			Number of Open-Ended Items Per Student			Total
Subject	Grade	Approximate Test length (not strictly timed)	# of Common Items	# of Equating Block Items	# of Field Test Items	# of Common Items	# of Equating Block Items	# of Field Test Items	# of Score Points per Student
Math	3-8	3-4 hours 3 sessions	60	2	10	3	0	1	60+12=72

The questions will be presented on each section of the test according to the following plan. The table below lists the types of items that will be presented in each section ('MC' = multiple choice and 'OE' = open-ended) and how many of each will be presented. The second table shows the number and types of items on the PSSA-M Mathematics Test.

<b>2012 - 2013 PSSA Mathematics Test</b>							
Section Number and Content	Grade Level						
	3	4	5	6	7	8	11
<b>1 Mathematics</b>	24 MC 2 OE	24 MC 2 OE	24 MC 2 OE	24 MC 2 OE	24 MC 2 OE	24 MC 2 OE	NA
<b>3 Mathematics</b>	24 MC 1 OE	24 MC 1 OE	24 MC 1 OE	24 MC 1 OE	24 MC 1 OE	24 MC 1 OE	NA
<b>5 Mathematics</b>	24 MC 1 OE	24 MC 1 OE	24 MC 1 OE	24 MC 1 OE	24 MC 1 OE	24 MC 1 OE	NA

<b>2012 - 2013 PSSA-M Mathematics Test</b>						
Grade	4	5	6	7	8	11
Section 1	15 MC 1 OE	15 MC 1 OE	15 MC 1 OE	15 MC 1 OE	15 MC 1 OE	NA
Section 2	15 MC 1 OE	15 MC 1 OE	15 MC 1 OE	15 MC 1 OE	15 MC 1 OE	NA

### Test Blueprint

The test blueprint gives information on the Assessment Anchor Content Standards measured on the PSSA, and the number of points assigned to each Reporting Category. By analyzing the blueprint, insight can be gained into how best to prepare students to meet weighted expectations set by PDE and the PSSA Advisory Committees.

**2012 - 2013 PSSA Grade 3 - 8 Mathematics Assessment Blueprint\***

Reporting Category	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8	Grade 11
<b>A. Numbers And Operations</b>	40% - 50%	43% - 47%	41% - 45%	28% - 32%	20% - 24%	18% - 22%	NA
<b>B. Measurement</b>	12% - 15%	12% - 15%	12% - 15%	12% - 15%	12% - 15%	12% - 15%	NA
<b>C. Geometry</b>	12% - 15%	12% - 15%	12% - 15%	15% - 20%	15% - 20%	15% - 20%	NA
<b>D. Algebraic Concepts</b>	12% - 15%	12% - 15%	13% - 17%	15% - 20%	20% - 27%	25% - 30%	NA
<b>E. Data Analysis and Probability</b>	13% - 16%	12% - 15%	12% - 15%	15% - 20%	15% - 20%	15% - 20%	NA
<b>Total Points</b>	<b>72 pts.</b>	<b>72 pts.</b>	<b>72 pts.</b>	<b>72 pts.</b>	<b>72 pts.</b>	<b>72 pts.</b>	

*\*At each grade level the table shows the range in the percent of points to be devoted to each reporting category. The exact percentage for a reporting category will depend upon where the open-ended items are placed..*

### ***Use of Calculators and Other Tools***

- Calculator Usage in the Assessment:** Calculators are not permitted on the Grade 3 PSSA, but are permitted in all other grades. Except for the items in the non-calculator component, students are permitted to use calculators throughout the assessment. A major reason for this is that the majority of the items and tasks have been developed with an emphasis upon problem-solving applications. For such tasks, the calculator truly is a tool. The calculations required are typically not ones that involve large numbers. Rather, what is important is the student's ability to make proper decisions about operations and procedures. The calculator assists students in carrying out those decisions, but is of secondary importance in solving such problems. All tasks can be solved without the use of a calculator. However, certain grade 11 tasks are more difficult if a calculator is not available.

The type of calculator used should be appropriate to the grade level of the student involved in the testing. There is no need for a graphing calculator for a Grade 5 student, but a graphing calculator could be helpful to a Grade 11 student. A graphing calculator is a tool for quickly visualizing math. An equation is typed, and the graphing calculator draws it for you without complicated dialogs or commands. At the Grade 8 level, scientific calculators could be helpful.

Students using a calculator for the Mathematics PSSA should be familiar with the use of that specific calculator before the first day of the test. Students need to be instructed in the use of calculators in Mathematics or this tool can actually hinder the students' performance on the PSSA. For the calculator use policy see

<http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt?open=18&objID=354429&mode=2>

- **The Use of Rulers on the Assessment:** Students in grades 3, 4, 5 and 6 are required to use rulers to measure lines or figures presented in the test. Small rulers are included with the testing materials for students to use. The rulers are scaled as indicated in the table below. Students must use the rulers provided with the test on the PSSA.

## Rulers

<u>Grade</u>	<u>Scaled to</u>	<u>Measure to</u>
3	¼ inch and	Nearest ½ inch
4	1/8 inch and millimeter	Nearest ¼ inch or centimeter
5	1/16 inch and millimeter	Nearest 1/8 inch or centimeter
6	1/16 inch and millimeter	Nearest 1/16 inch or millimeter

- **Reference (Formula) Sheets:** [Reference Sheets](#) are provided for the Grades 7 and 8 PSSA. These Reference Sheets include formulas and/or conversion tables that students may need when working on problems. The URLs for the Reference Sheets are included in the Appendix of this handbook. The grade level appropriate Reference Sheet will also be included in the PSSA test booklet. Teachers should post and use the Reference Sheets on a regular basis throughout the year. Students may have a copy of the Reference Sheet on their desks and it can be posted in the room during the exams. For those grades without a Reference Sheet formulas will be provided within the problem when needed as required by the Anchors.
- **The Use of Other Tools in the Assessment** - Students are not permitted to use mathematics books, dictionaries, thesauri, electronic devices (palm pilots, cell phones laptops, any device with beaming capabilities enabled) or reference materials when they are responding to PSSA Mathematics items. If such materials were allowed, students could use them, for example, to provide a correct answer to certain questions by looking up a definition (e.g., parallelogram) and then applying it. In addition, students may not use materials such as manipulative devices that would give them an unfair advantage over students who do not have such materials available during the PSSA and Keystone testing.

For more information about what is allowed during the Mathematics Assessment, see the current [Accommodations Guidelines](#).

## C. Small Mistakes on Open-Ended Responses

The following list shows some of the ways students lose points when their open-ended responses are scored. Students should regularly check over their responses, both in the classroom and on the PSSA, to make sure they have not made mistakes in dealing with the following:

### 1. Labeling Errors

<u>Category</u>	<u>Correct</u>	<u>Incorrect</u>
Area	6 ft <sup>2</sup> or 6 sq ft	6 <sup>2</sup> ft
Volume	6 cu ft or 6 ft <sup>3</sup>	6 <sup>3</sup> ft
Time	6 hrs 30 min or 6:30	6.3 hrs and 6:30 hours

### 2. Complete Responses

Scorers cannot infer understanding from student responses. **All responses to the test questions must be answered according to the directions.** Even if a mathematical formula and the written solution are given in the student's response, the directions given in the test questions must be followed. If part of a test question asks for a written example of the reason something is done, then it must be given to meet the requirements of a complete response.

Example of part of a test question:

“**List** all of the possible different three-digit arrangements that can be made using the numbers 1, 2 and 3.”

The student is asked to “**LIST**” the possible three-digit arrangements and nothing else. Quite often students see other mathematical processes that they were taught and do not follow what was asked of them.

For example, a student might know that the number of possible arrangements can be found by multiplying  $3 \times 2 \times 1 = 6$ , so the student answers: “6” or “6 ways to write the numbers.”\*

This student has not correctly answered the question. The student must list the 6 different arrangements: “123, 132, 213, 231, 312, 321.” The test question asks for a list and not for the number of possible arrangements. Not following directions is a very common manner in which students make errors in responding to open-ended responses.

*\*Note: Beginning in Grade 7 dots (ex:  $3 \bullet 2 = 6$ ) are used to represent multiplication.*

### 3. Subtraction and Division Problems



Students whose responses would qualify for the top score may lose a point because of a careless misstatement. For example, in describing the steps taken to solve a problem, a student might indicate that he or she “subtracted 12 from 5.”

<u>Operation</u>	<u>Correct</u>	<u>Incorrect</u>
Subtraction (12 – 5)	12 minus 5 5 subtracted from 12	12 subtracted from 5
Division (15 ÷ 5)	15 divided by 5 5 into 15	5 divided by 15 15 into 5

#### 4. Explanation -- The “WHY!”

Part of a Test Question: One stamp costs 44 cents. How much change should you receive when paying for 8 stamps with a \$5 bill? Show all of your work and explain **why** you did each step.

Solution:       $8 \times \$0.44 = \$3.52$                        $\$5.00 - \$3.52 = \$1.48$

Incomplete or insufficient: (does not explain “why” – just stated “what” was done) I multiplied \$.44 by 8 and got \$3.52. I subtracted \$5 minus \$3.52 and got \$1.48. My answer is \$1.48.

Correct: I multiplied \$.44 by 8 **to find out how much the stamps cost.** I then subtracted the cost of the stamps from \$5 **to find the change,** which was \$1.48.

## D. Links to Resources

[Assessment Anchor Content Standards](#)

[Item and Scoring Samplers](#)

[Grade 7 Formula Sheet](#)

[Grade 8 Formula Sheet](#)

[Algebra I Formula Sheet](#)

[Performance Level Descriptors](#)

[Performance Level Cut Scores](#)

# Part Five: Reading Content

## A. Overview of the PSSA Reading Test

### Calculating Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)

Students in grades 3-8 take the Reading test and results are reported to schools and districts. Results for all these grades are part of the AYP calculations.

### Application of the Assessment Anchor Content Standards

The Assessment Anchor Content Standards are used as a basis for the PSSA. The Department has received overwhelmingly positive feedback on the usefulness of the Assessment Anchor Content Standards and believes that Pennsylvania is building a more focused assessment system that is both aligned to the standards and more tightly tied to curriculum and instruction.

The Assessment Anchor Content Standards were critical in designing the Reading assessments. These Assessment Anchor Content Standards clarify what is expected from grade level to grade level, providing a clear vertical alignment.

**Two Reporting Categories:** The Department will continue to use two reporting categories for the Reading Assessment: (1) Comprehension and Reading Skills and (2) Interpretation and Analysis of Fictional and Nonfictional Text.

**PSSA Reporting Categories Chart**

<b>PSSA Reporting Category</b>	<b>Academic Standard for Reading</b>
A. Comprehension and Reading Skills	1.1 Learning to Read Independently 1.2 Reading Critically in All Content Areas
B. Interpretation and Analysis of Fictional and Nonfictional Text	1.1 Learning to Read Independently 1.2 Reading Critically in All Content Areas 1.3 Reading, Analyzing and Interpreting Literature

**Standards Assessed:** *Because of the shift to create a clearer and more focused test using the Assessment Anchor Content Standards, the PSSA Reading Assessment assesses only the Reading standards.* These are the first three of Pennsylvania’s eight Academic Standards for Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening. Learning to read independently (Standard 1.1) and critically (Standard 1.2) and learning to interpret and analyze fiction and nonfiction (Standard 1.3) are at the heart of what students must be able to do to be good readers in today’s society. Additionally, student achievement of these standards particularly lends itself to being measured through large-scale testing. Standards 1.4 and 1.5 relate to Writing and are addressed in the PSSA Writing Assessment for grades 5 and 8. Standards 1.6, 1.7, and 1.8, which deal with speaking and listening skills, characteristics and function of the English language, and how to conduct research, are not specific to Reading and, because of the nature of these standards, are more accurately assessed at the district/school level.

**Multiple-Choice Items:** Multiple-choice questions are also termed “selected response,” as students select their answers from among those provided. Such items are an efficient means of assessing performance on a broad range of Assessment Anchors. In the PSSA, all multiple-choice items have only one correct response choice, and the student is awarded one point for choosing it. For all multiple-choice items students are provided with four choices.

**Open-Ended Items:** Open-ended questions are also termed “constructed response,” as students construct their answers without being presented with any answer choices. Such items allow students to provide individual responses to certain Assessment Anchors and ensure that a certain number of score points on the assessment cannot be obtained simply by guessing. In the PSSA, all open-ended items can be answered in many different ways. In Reading, students are awarded from zero to three points for the content and completeness of their response. *Please note that scores on the open-ended questions do **not** equate with student proficiency levels.*

**Clarification of the Instructions for Open-Ended Items:** In an effort to make the expectations for responses to open-ended items clearer to students, the Department will continue to provide more explicit instructions for students. For example, if a short response requires students to identify the reasons why something has occurred in a passage, the item will clarify how many reasons are needed for a complete answer, or a statement like “List at least two reasons why...” or “Use at least two examples/details from the text to support your answer...” will be provided. This type of wording will appear in the item and the scoring guideline. This wording makes the expectation explicit so that students are clear about what they need to do to respond successfully to the item.

**Requirements for Responses to Open-Ended Items: Compare AND Contrast**  
In 2007, the approach to writing test questions changed to include “compare AND contrast.” When a question is worded in this way, students are expected to provide both similarities AND differences in their response.

**Item-Specific Scoring Guidelines:** The PSSA open-ended items for Reading ask students to organize their thinking and statements in a short, concise manner, using patterns of development that *focus on the meanings of the texts* (e.g., summarize, identify, explain, and analyze). The Reading items are scored with an item-specific scoring guideline on a 0–3 scale. For each open-ended item, the General Scoring Guidelines are adapted so that scorers know how to weigh important aspects of student responses. Examples of Item-Specific Scoring Guidelines are included in the Item and Scoring Samplers, found here:

[http://www.education.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/pennsylvania\\_system\\_of\\_school\\_assessment\\_%28pssa%29/8757/resource\\_materials/507610](http://www.education.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/pennsylvania_system_of_school_assessment_%28pssa%29/8757/resource_materials/507610).

**Clarification of the Meaning of Scores for Open-Ended Items:** It is important to remember that the scoring guidelines for open-ended items on the Reading test do not equate with the four performance levels used to describe overall performance on the PSSA assessment: Advanced, Proficient, Basic and Below Basic. These performance levels describe a student’s overall performance and should not be confused with the point scale on the scoring guideline for open-ended items.

## Provision of Performance Level Descriptors for Overall Performance Scores

NCLB mandates that states define levels of overall performance on statewide assessments. These [Performance Level Descriptors](#) (PLDs) provide very detailed descriptors of the expected overall performance levels at grades 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8.

## PSSA Reading: Keep in Mind

- 📖 Teachers should read the Eligible Content carefully and become familiar with it.
- 📖 Fiction and nonfiction passages may be paired; poems may be paired with a passage or with another poem.
- 📖 Open-ended items should take students about 10 minutes to answer. Open-ended items may appear with any type of passage.
- 📖 Students should look at all parts of an item and be sure to answer each part of an item.
- 📖 Students may look back to the passage when answering questions, particularly for context clue items. Students should know and understand why some words are underlined in the passage.
- 📖 Students need to read all answer choices carefully before selecting one as the correct answer.
- 📖 Students need to know character traits/characteristics/personality traits.
- 📖 Students may be asked to “compare AND contrast.”
- 📖 *Explain, compare* and *evaluate* are part of the meaning of the broader term “analyze.”
- 📖 Students need to know to include a beginning, middle and end for summaries of narrative or chronologically-organized passages.
- 📖 Students need to know how to use and how to include examples found in the passage as support and as an explanation for an answer to open-ended items.
- 📖 Students need to know how to explain, describe and analyze parts of a passage, not just identify certain parts.

### *Length of Testing Time*

The PSSA measures students’ ability to meet the state standards, no matter how much time it takes them to do so. In that sense, the PSSA is not a timed test, and **every student** gets extra time if he or she needs it. There are, however, certain conditions that teachers must observe to give students extra time. These guidelines are described in the assessment [Administration Manuals](#) and the current [Accommodations Guidelines](#). The most important condition is that any extra time must come immediately after the testing period and not after lunch and/or the next day. Please note that after a student completes a section, the teacher or administrator is **not** permitted to allow the student to go back and revisit the section. The only exceptions on spacing the test sessions are for students with accommodations written into their IEPs.

For planning purposes, the following table lists the approximate number of minutes necessary to administer each section of the Reading test at each grade level. The total number of minutes needed for each testing session can be found in the column highlighted in green. To the right of that column, the range of minutes is broken down into the amount of time estimated for accomplishing administrative tasks related to the test session and the amount of time students will need to spend reading and responding to test questions. Note that this information is the same for all Grade levels.

Approximate Administration Time, 2012-2013 Reading PSSA Grades 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8.			
Section Number and Content	Approximate Total No. of Minutes Needed for Testing Session	No. of Minutes for Administrative Tasks Before and After Students Read and Respond to Test Questions	No. of Minutes for Students to Read and Respond to Test Questions
2 Reading	Gr. 3: 73- mins. Gr. 4-8: 65-90 mins.	15 to 20 mins.	Gr. 3: <b>58 to 70</b> mins. Gr. 4-8: 50-75 mins.
4 Reading	Gr. 3: 65-90 mins. Gr. 4-8: 65-90 mins.	15 to 20 mins.	Gr. 3: <b>50 to 70</b> mins. Gr. 4-8: 50-75 mins.
6 Reading	Gr. 3: 65-90 mins. Gr. 4-8: 65-90 mins.	15 to 20 mins.	Gr. 3: <b>50 to 70</b> mins. Gr. 4-8: 50-75 mins.

### *Types of Questions on the Reading PSSA*

As mentioned above, the PSSA has both multiple-choice and open-ended items. Students need to know how to respond to both types of items on the PSSA. For the 2011-2012 Reading PSSA, each multiple-choice question is worth one point and each open-ended question is worth up to 3 points. The Reading test will include the following numbers and types of questions:

2012-2013 Reading PSSA Test							
Grade	Number of Multiple-Choice Items Per Student			Number of Open-Ended Items Per Student			Total
	No. of Common Items	No. of Equating Block Items	No. of Field Test Items	No. of Common Items	No. of Equating Block Items	No. of Field Test Items	No. of Points per Student, Common Items Only, Used for AYP Purposes
3	<b>40</b>	8	10	<b>2</b>	0	1	<b>40 + (2 x 3)= 46</b>
4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11	<b>40</b>	8	10	<b>4</b>	0	1	<b>40 + (4 x 3)= 52</b>

The questions will be presented on each section of the test according to the following plan. The table below lists the types of items that will be presented in each section ('MC' = multiple choice and 'OE' = open-ended) and how many of each will be presented.

2012-2013 Reading PSSA Test							
Section Number and Content	Grade Level						
	3	4	5	6	7	8	11
2 Reading	23 MC 1 OE	24 MC 2 OE	23 MC 2 OE	20 MC 2 OE	20 MC 2 OE	20 MC 2 OE	23 MC 2 OE
4 Reading	18 MC 1 OE	18 MC 1 OE	18 MC 1 OE	18 MC 1 OE	18 MC 1 OE	18 MC 1 OE	18 MC 1 OE
6 Reading	17 MC 1 OE	16 MC 2 OE	17 MC 2 OE	20 MC 2 OE	20 MC 2 OE	20 MC 2 OE	17 MC 2 OE

### Assessment Anchor Coverage

The following table gives information about coverage within the 2011-2012 PSSA Reading Assessment of the Reporting Categories related to the Assessment Anchor Content Standards. It includes the approximate percent of the test assigned to each Reporting Category. These percentages may vary slightly from year to year. Note that this table provides information only on the common, or *core*, items.

### 2013-2013 PSSA Grade 3 – 8 Reading Assessment Blueprint\*

Reporting Category	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8	Grade 11
A. Comprehension and Reading Skills	60% - 80%	60% - 80%	60% - 80%	50% - 70%	50% - 70%	40% - 60%	40% - 60%
B. Interpretation and Analysis of Fiction and Nonfiction Text	20% - 40%	20% - 40%	20% - 40%	30% - 50%	30% - 50%	40% - 60%	40% - 60%
<b>Total Points</b>	<b>46 pts.</b>	<b>52 pts.</b>	<b>52 pts.</b>	<b>52 pts.</b>	<b>52 pts.</b>	<b>52 pts.</b>	<b>52 pts.</b>

\*Percentages are approximate

## B. Linking the PSSA to Classroom Practice

### What Successful Schools Are Doing to Improve Reading Achievement

Improving Reading achievement requires a systematic approach that involves students in the technical skills of Reading while building comprehension of texts and ideas. For this reason, Reading is inextricably partnered with thinking. One way to describe the act of teaching the young reader is to view our work, as one author puts it, as “making the reader see.” Some schools are finding that the following strategies improve student achievement in Reading.

## **Elementary Reading Skills**

- Teach emergent reading skills as early as pre-kindergarten and kindergarten.
- Diagnose student instructional needs and find ways to provide appropriate instruction.
- Adopt common pedagogical methods so students can easily move from one classroom to another and apply the same skills.
- Use a systematic approach, either through a common program or a textbook series.
- Plan and articulate a reading-rich curriculum.
- Encourage students to read often and to read a variety of materials; monitor and reward children for their efforts.
- Intervene when children are struggling, using a “nip it in the bud” approach.
- Use discussion-based techniques to clarify and model how readers think about ideas in texts.
- Summarize and repeat often; this is a most basic skill to help the reader clarify and synthesize information.
- Use “think alouds” to develop skills in comprehension, linking ideas to text, and text to ideas.
- Focus professional development on the teaching of Reading.
- Monitor reading progress often using a variety of methods.

## **Secondary Reading Skills**

- Have all staff accept responsibility for teaching reading skills and monitoring progress.
- Have all subject areas address reading inside their content and curricula.
- Use data and diagnostic methods to know students, to gain an understanding of their reading proficiencies, and to find ways to support and intervene where necessary.
- Provide professional development in teaching reading for all staff and use common strategies in core and elective classes.
- Partner reading with writing.
- Link reading and study skills, including taking notes and summarizing texts.
- Have students use reading as a means for gaining understanding of complex ideas, points of view and positions.
- Move between teaching short and long texts and simple and complex texts, always stretching students’ minds and interests.
- Engage adults and students in discussions about what they’ve read and what engaged them in those readings.
- Extend students’ reading experiences beyond their immediate world, allowing them to empathize with the unfamiliar and to gain knowledge of places, cultures, and beliefs that are new or different.
- Follow reading of texts with frequent discussion and use discussion as a primary teaching tool.

## **C. Released Items and Scoring Guidelines**

Each year, in the *Item and Scoring Samplers* posted on the PDE website, the Department of Education releases a number of passages with multiple-choice items and open-ended items that have been developed to reflect the Assessment Anchor Content Standards. The Department also provides examples of scored items for review: the released open-ended items are accompanied by student work as well as item-specific scoring guidelines.

The multiple-choice and open-ended items in the sampler may be used by teachers as samples for writing additional (practice) items, and they may also be copied and used as part of an instructional program. Multiple-choice items are constructed with four answer choices, only one of which is correct. Open-ended items, which should take about 10 minutes to complete, are scored with item-specific scoring guidelines on a 0–3 scale for Reading.

## **D. Links to Resources**

The main PDE Assessment web page is located at this address:

[http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/Pennsylvania\\_System\\_of\\_School\\_Assessment\\_\(PSSA\)/8757/](http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/Pennsylvania_System_of_School_Assessment_(PSSA)/8757/).

The following resources can be accessed using the links on that page:

[Assessment Anchor Content Standards](#)

[Item and Scoring Samplers](#)

[Performance Level Descriptors](#)

[Performance Level Cut Scores](#)



## **Part Six: Science Content**

### **A. Overview of the PSSA Science Test**

Science knowledge is organized to provide a structure that connects and creates meaning for factual information. This organization is influenced by the context in which the learner interacts with the physical world, with peers, with teachers, and with the community.

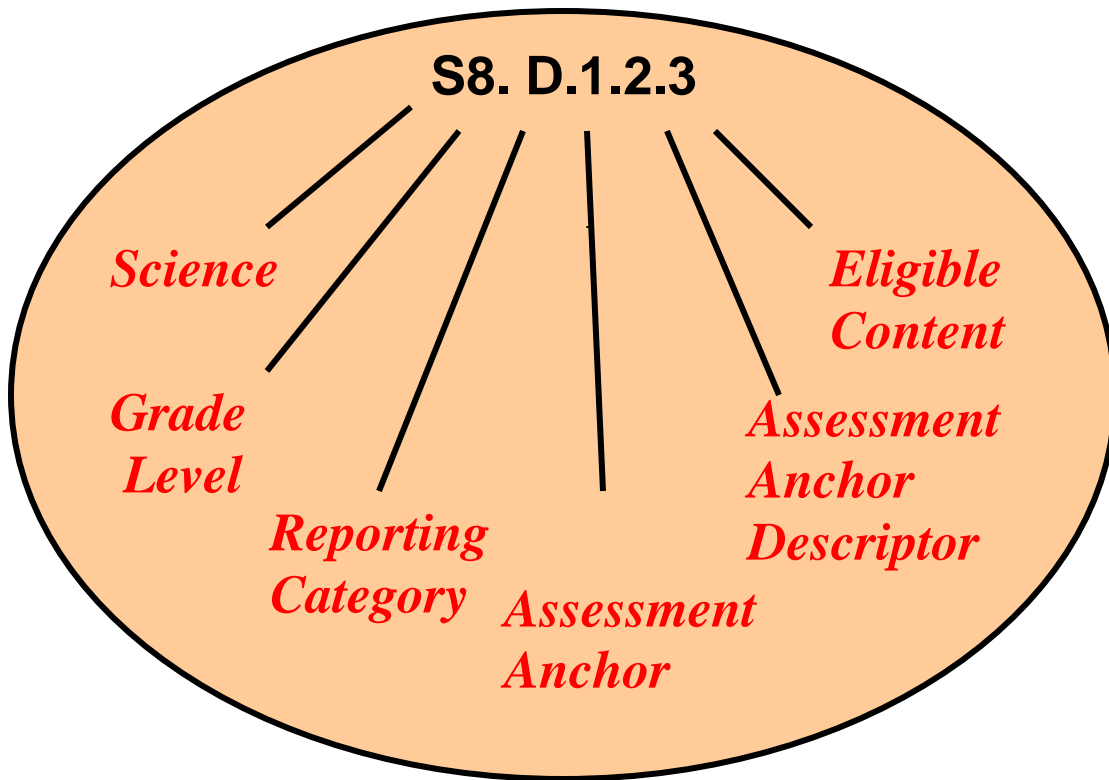
In this view, science proficiency depends upon the ability to know facts and integrate them into larger constructs and to use tools, procedures, and reasoning processes of natural science for an increased understanding of the natural world

In developing the model for the 2006-2007 field test, PDE recognized the challenges in reporting on all 61 Science Standards/17 standards categories contained in the Science, Technology, Environment and Ecology (STEE) documents. By integrating several related categories together, PDE was able to develop a model that would provide districts minimal data in 4 reporting categories. The reporting categories are based on the Standard Categories listed in parentheses; Nature of Science (3.1, 3.2, 3.6, 3.7, 3.8, 4.4, 4.6, and 4.8), Biological Sciences (3.1, 3.3, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 4.6, and 4.7), Physical Sciences (3.2, 3.4, and 3.6), and Earth and Space Sciences (3.2, 3.4, 3.5, 3.7, 4.1, 4.2, and 4.8).

In creating these 4 reporting categories, PDE focused on the need to provide districts with meaningful data and on the need for the State itself and for the districts to meet the requirements of several education laws. State laws taken into consideration for the development of this model were Act 24 of 1993 and Act 16 of 1999. Act 24 requires PDE to evaluate school district environmental education programs. Act 16 redefines the PSSA to include science.

### **B. Science Assessment Anchor Content Standards**

All of the Science Assessment Anchor Content Standards begin with an “S” to indicate science. The number after the “S” in the label is the grade level (e.g., S8 would be Science at eighth grade). The second letter in the labeling system is the Reporting Category (A through D) followed by the Assessment Anchor number (e.g., S8.D.1 would be Science at grade 8, the D is the Reporting Category of Earth and Space Sciences and the 1 represents the Assessment Anchor of Earth Features and Processes that Change Earth’s Surface). The last two digits in the number are the Assessment Anchor Descriptor and the Eligible Content. The following illustration is an example of an Assessment Anchor and how it is to be read.



**S8.D.1.1** is broken down as follows:

S = Science

8 = Grade 8

D = Earth and Space Sciences (Reporting Category)

1 = Earth Features and Processes that Change Earth and Its Resources (Assessment Anchor)

1 = Describe constructive and destructive natural processes that form different geologic structures and resources. (Assessment Anchor Descriptor)

- **Reporting Categories:** The Anchors are organized into four Reporting Categories. These categories are similar to the NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) Reporting Categories. PA Academic Standard Statements were examined, and most were placed in the appropriate Reporting Categories. The following table illustrates the connections between the Standards and the four Reporting Categories.

Reporting Categories	Connections to the Standards	
	Science and Technology	Ecology and the Environment
<b>A. The Nature of Science</b>	3.1 Unifying Themes of Science 3.2 Inquiry and Design 3.6 Technology Education 3.7 Technological Devices 3.8 Science, Technology, and Human Endeavors	4.4 Agriculture and Society 4.6 Ecosystems and their Interactions 4.7 Threatened, Endangered, and Extinct Species 4.8 Humans and the Environment
<b>B. Biological Sciences</b>	3.1 Unifying Themes of Science 3.3 Biological Sciences	4.2 Renewable and Nonrenewable Resources 4.3 Environmental Health 4.5 Agriculture and Society 4.6 Ecosystems and their Interactions 4.7 Threatened, Endangered, and Extinct Species
<b>C. Physical Sciences</b>	3.2 Inquiry and Design 3.4 Physical Science, Chemistry, and Physics 3.6 Earth Sciences	
<b>D. Earth and Space Sciences</b>	3.2 Inquiry and Design 3.4 Physical Science, Chemistry, and Physics 3.5 Earth Sciences 3.7 Technological Devices	4.1 Watersheds and Wetlands 4.2 Renewable and Nonrenewable Resources 4.8 Humans and the Environment

- Item-Specific Scoring Guidelines:** Some of the Science items are scored with item-specific scoring guidelines. The stand-alone open-ended items are scored on a 0–2 scale. The scenario open-ended items are scored on a 0–4 scale.  
*Note: The scoring guidelines do not equate with the four performance levels - Advanced, Proficient, Basic, and Below Basic. These performance levels describe a student’s overall performance and should not be confused with the point scale on the scoring guideline for open-ended items.*
- Open-Ended Items:** The Science stand-alone open-ended items are about 5-10 minutes in length and are written so there is more than one approach to correctly answering the item. The scenario open-ended items are about 15-20 minutes in length.

### C. Test Highlights

This section describes some basic information about the PSSA including the testing window, length of the tests, test format, and types of questions that will appear on the test.

#### *Test Blueprint*

The test blueprint gives information on the Assessment Anchor Content Standards measured on the PSSA, including relative weights and the number of points assigned to each Reporting Category. Analyzing the blueprint can give insight on how to prepare students to meet weighted expectations set by the PDE and the PSSA Advisory Committees.

## 2011-2012 PSSA

### Grades 4, 8, and 11 Science Assessment Blueprint\*

Reporting Category	Grade 4	Grade 8	Grade 11
The Nature of Science	34	34	37
Biological Sciences	12	12	13
Physical Sciences	11	11	12
Earth and Space Sciences	11	11	12
<b>Total Points</b>	<b>68 pts.</b>	<b>68 pts.</b>	<b>74 pts.</b>

*\*At each grade level, the table shows the number of points assigned to each reporting category. At grades 4 and 8, ten of the total points will come from 5 open-ended items, each scored from 0 to 2 points. At Grade 11, 24 of the total points will come from 6 open-ended items, each scored from 0 to 2 points; and 3 scenarios, each scored from 0 to 4 points.*

#### ***2011-2012 Approximate Length of Testing Time***

The PSSA measures students' ability to meet the Assessment Anchors, regardless of how much time it takes. Thus, the PSSA is not a timed test; **every student** receives extra time if needed. However, there are certain conditions that test administrators must observe to give students extra time. These guidelines are described in the assessment administration manuals and the current version of the [Accommodations Guidelines](#). The most important condition is that any extra time must come immediately after the testing period and not after lunch and/or the next day. The only exceptions on spacing the test sections are for students with accommodations written into their IEPs.

The estimated time to administer each Operational Science test is as follows:

#### **Science**

Grade Level	Number of Test Sections	Approximate Testing Time
Grade 4	2 sections	120-150 minutes
Grade 8	2 sections	130-160 minutes
Grade 11	3 sections	190-235 minutes

#### ***2011-2012 Types of Questions***

The Science PSSA has both multiple-choice and open-ended items with grade 8 and grade 11 having scenarios. A scenario is a content-rich passage that requires students to use both content knowledge and science process knowledge to answer complex problems by using graphics (e.g., graphs, charts, tables, diagrams, illustrations) to support the scenario text. The scenario items are specifically aligned to eligible content that Pennsylvania educators developed. When answering

the items associated with scenario stimuli, students are required to use their content knowledge and science process knowledge. Some of the eligible content requires that students pull pertinent information from the scenario and others require that students use prompts from the scenario to answer content-based questions. Because scenario questions require content knowledge, mere reading comprehension skills will not be sufficient to succeed. In grade 8 there will be one scenario that will be answered with multiple-choice items. In grade 11 there will be three scenarios that will be answered with multiple-choice and 4-point open-ended items. Students need to know how to respond well to all types of items, including scenarios, to score at the proficient level on the PSSA.

Multiple-choice questions are also termed “selected response” because students choose their answers from among those provided. Such items are an efficient means of assessing a broad range of Anchors. In the PSSA Science Assessment, all multiple-choice items have only one correct response choice, and the student is awarded one point for choosing it. For all multiple-choice items students are provided with four choices.

The following table displays the Science test design that includes the number and types of questions:

<i>2011-2012 PSSA Science Test Format</i>										
		Number of Multiple-Choice Items Per Student				Number of Open-Ended Items Per Student				Total Number of Points (Common Items Only)
Grade	Estimated Length of Test	Number of Common Items	Number of Common Scenario Items	Number Of Equating Block Items	Number of Field Test Items	Number of Common Items (2 points each)	Number of Common Scenario items (4 points each)	Number of Equating Block Items	Number of Field Test Items	Number of Score Points per Student
4	120-150 minutes 2 sections	<b>58</b>	<b>0</b>	2	8	<b>5</b>	<b>0</b>	0	1	$58+10=68$
8	130-160 minutes 2 Sections	<b>54</b>	<b>4</b>	2	10	<b>5</b>	<b>0</b>	0	1	$58+10=68$
11	190-235 minutes 3 sections	<b>38</b>	<b>12</b>	2	10	<b>6</b>	<b>3</b>	0	2	$50+12+12=74$

## **Part Seven: Frequently Asked Questions about the PSSA**

**Q: What is the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA)?**

A: The PSSA is a state assessment in Mathematics, Reading, Writing, and Science given each year to Pennsylvania's public school students to measure students' achievement of the Pennsylvania Assessment Anchor Content Standards.

**Q: Who creates/develops the assessment?**

A: A number of different groups are involved in the development of the PSSA. The items on the assessment have been developed by testing contractors and are reviewed and revised by the Pennsylvania Department of Education and Pennsylvania teachers. A Technical Advisory Committee (TAC), composed of some of the leading assessment experts in the country, assists in the format of the assessment.

**Q: How were items chosen for the PSSA?**

A: All items were written by experienced content experts, field-tested by Pennsylvania students, and scored by teams of experienced trained readers with at least a four-year degree and a strong content-specific background. All items have been reviewed by committees of Pennsylvania teachers to determine their appropriateness for each grade level. Items were chosen based on professional experience and knowledge of the most commonly made mistakes by students at each level.

**Q: Who must take the assessment?**

A: Mathematics and Reading Assessments are administered to all public school students in grades 3–8; the Writing Assessment is administered to all public school students in grades 5 and 8. The Science Assessment is administered to all public school students in grades 4 and 8. Private school students may participate if the private school volunteers to participate. Home-schooled students may also volunteer to participate. Parents of home-schooled children should contact the local district to arrange for inclusion in the testing.

**Q: Can a parent or guardian opt out a child from taking the PSSA?**

A: Yes, a parent or guardian may opt out his/her child from taking the PSSA for religious reasons. After review of the PSSA, if a parent or guardian chooses to opt his/her child out of participation in the PSSA because of a conflict with religious belief, the parent or guardian must make such a request in writing to the district superintendent.

**Q: What are the consequences of not participating in the assessment?**

A: Because the PSSA is designed to measure a student's level of achievement of the Academic Standards as identified by the Assessment Anchor Content Standards, non-participation prevents the student from seeing how well s/he has achieved the Anchors. Also, non-participation affects a school's overall results. If a significant percentage of students fail to participate in the assessment, a true picture of the school will not be presented. Finally, federal legislation makes it mandatory for each school to have at least 95% of its population participate in the state assessment, or it will fail to make adequate yearly progress (AYP).

**Q: Must special education students participate in the assessment?**

A: Yes, all students are required to participate. Students who have significant cognitive disabilities must participate in an alternate assessment (PASA). Special education students participating in the regular assessment must be provided accommodations in the environment as stipulated under Chapter 14 and 15 of 22 PA Code regarding their instruction. For additional information, see the current [Accommodations Guidelines](#). Additional information about alternate assessments is available from the I.U. Special Education Division, Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN), and the PDE Bureau of Special Education.

**Q: Must English Language Learner (ELL) students participate in the assessment?**

A: The U.S. Department of Education released guidance on participation of ELL students in state assessments. This flexibility will allow ELL students in their first year of enrollment in U.S. schools, not including Puerto Rico, the option of taking the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) Reading assessment. If students choose to participate, their performance level results will not be included in the AYP calculations for the school/district. All ELL students are still required to participate in the Mathematics and Science assessments, with accommodations if appropriate. However, the Mathematics (Science is not part of AYP) scores of ELL students in their first year of enrollment in U.S. schools, not including Puerto Rico, will not be used to determine AYP status. ELLs in their first year of enrollment in U.S. schools are not required to take the PSSA Writing test, but they may choose to do so. All ELLs must take the PSSA Science assessment. For additional information, see the Accommodations Guidelines for English Language Learners.

**Q: Must students perform at a certain level on the PSSA to graduate?**

A: Section 4.24 of the Pennsylvania School Code requires that students be proficient in the Mathematics, Reading, and Writing Academic Standards to graduate; however, the state allows each school district to determine how a child demonstrates proficiency, either using the PSSA or using a local assessment aligned with the Academic Standards and the PSSA. If a district chooses the PSSA as the instrument to demonstrate proficiency, a child will be accountable to the graduation requirements of that district.

**Q: What is meant by “proficient”?**

A: Pennsylvania has identified four levels of performance: The **Advanced** Level reflects superior academic performance. Advanced work indicates an in-depth understanding and exemplary display of the skills included in the Assessment Anchors. The **Proficient** Level reflects satisfactory academic performance. Proficient work indicates a solid understanding and adequate display of the skills included in the Assessment Anchors. The **Basic** Level reflects marginal academic performance. Basic work indicates a partial understanding and limited display of the skills included in the Assessment Anchors. This work is approaching but not reaching satisfactory performance. There is a need for additional instructional opportunities and/or increased student academic commitment to achieve the Proficient Level. The **Below Basic** Level reflects inadequate academic performance. Below Basic

work indicates little understanding and minimal display of the skills included in the Assessment Anchors. There is a major need for additional instructional opportunities and/or increased student academic commitment to achieve the Proficient Level.

**Q: How were performance levels developed?**

A: The Pennsylvania Department of Education used the statistical standard-setting procedure called the Modified Bookmark Method. Pennsylvania teachers, higher education representatives, and members of educational and assessment organizations, such as the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment (NCIEA), examined the PSSA booklets with questions ordered from easiest to hardest. Based on their experience in determining students' achievements at different levels, determinations were made of advanced, proficient, basic, and below basic by placing a "bookmark" at the point in the booklet that best represented each level.

**Q: Where can I obtain more information on the PSSA?**

A: From the PDE website:  
[http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/Pennsylvania\\_System\\_of\\_School\\_Assessment\\_\(PSSA\)/8757](http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/Pennsylvania_System_of_School_Assessment_(PSSA)/8757).

**Q: What are Assessment Anchor Content Standards?**

A: The [Assessment Anchor Content Standards](#) (often referred to as "Assessment Anchors") clarify the standards assessed on the PSSA and can be used by educators to help prepare their students for the PSSA. The metaphor of an "anchor" is used to signal that the Assessment Anchor Content Standards anchor the state assessment system and the curriculum/instructional practices in schools.

**Q: Why do we need Assessment Anchor Content Standards if we already have the Pennsylvania Standards?**

A: Since 1999, teachers across the Commonwealth have been using a set of state Academic Standards to develop curriculum and instructional materials. Likewise, the Department and teacher committees have been using the standards to develop the state assessments. The Assessment Anchor Content Standards target a specific band of Academic Standards, clarifying the relation of the PSSA to the Academic Standards.

**Q: Do the Assessment Anchor Content Standards replace the Pennsylvania Academic Standards?**

A: No. The Assessment Anchor Content Standards do not replace the Academic Standards (the Standards). All teachers are still required to teach all of the Standards per Chapter 4 Regulations and use local assessments to measure student progress. The Anchors simply clarify which Standards are assessed on the PSSA.

**Q: Will teachers teach only the Assessment Anchor Content Standards and ignore other knowledge and skills?**

A: The Assessment Anchor Content Standards were written with the intent of having interdisciplinary discussions about how Mathematics and Reading Assessment Anchors can be taught in Science, Social Studies, the Arts and other content areas. The intent of the Assessment Anchors is not to narrow the curriculum, but to communicate the essential



skills and knowledge in Reading and Mathematics (and Science and Writing) that can be taught across the curriculum. Another intent is to identify the Academic Standards that are eligible for assessment via the PSSA, as the Standards cover more skills and knowledge than can be covered by the PSSA.

**Q: How were the Assessment Anchor Content Standards selected, and by whom?**

A: The Department of Education identified the Assessment Anchor Content Standards based on the recommendations of teachers serving on the Mathematics, Reading, and Science Assessment Advisory Committees and other curriculum experts. The Department also looked to national organizations (i.e., NCTM, NCTE, NSTA, and NAEP) and other external groups for input. Seven criteria were used for the development of the Assessment Anchors. The Anchors had to be:

- **Clear:** The Anchors need to clarify which standards are assessed on the PSSA in an easy to read and user friendly format.
- **Focused:** Not all of the instructional Academic Standards can be assessed on a large-scale state assessment. Rather than have teachers “guess” which standards are most critical, the Anchors identify a core set of content standards that could reasonably be assessed on a large-scale assessment.
- **Aligned:** The focus is on helping students achieve the state’s Academic Standards. The Anchors align directly to the state’s Academic Standards in Mathematics, Reading, Science and Technology, and Environment and Ecology and simply clarify those Standards.
- **Grade Appropriate:** The Anchors provide clear examples of skills and knowledge that should be learned at the different grade levels that will be assessed on state tests.
- **Organized to Support a Curricular Flow:** In Mathematics and Reading rather than simply identifying Anchors in the grades for which the state has Academic Standards, Assessment Anchor Content Standards were developed in Grades 3 through 8 and grade 11 to encourage a curricular spiral that builds each year to the next.
- **Rigorous:** The rigor of the state standards is maintained through the Anchors. In addition, the State will continue to use open-ended items on the PSSA to assess higher order reasoning and problem solving skills.
- **Manageable:** The Anchors identify a set of standards that could be taught in a manageable way before the spring administration of the PSSA.

**Q: How are the Assessment Anchor Content Standards organized?**

A: The Assessment Anchor Content Standards are available in grades 3 through 8 and grade 11 in Mathematics and in Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening. The Assessment Anchor Content Standards are available in Science in grades 4, 8 and 11. In these documents you will find the following:

- **Reporting Category:** The Assessment Anchor Content Standards are organized by Reporting Categories. The Reporting Category appears at the very top of each page. Reporting Categories are important because individual student scores will be reported at this level. District and school reports may include reports by Assessment Anchor Content Standards if there are enough questions on the PSSA to warrant a valid score by the broad Anchor statement.

- **Assessment Anchor Content Standard:** The Assessment Anchor Content Standard appears in the shaded bar across the top of the page. (*It is called the “Assessment Anchor” in the document*). The Assessment Anchor document is organized in outline form, with the main concept shaded in gray. Just beneath, in the left-hand column, are more specific descriptors. Eligible Content appears to the right of the descriptors and can be used for instructional purposes. Both the concept in the shaded gray area and the descriptors (which appear one per page) are part of the Assessment Anchor Content Standard.
- **References:** Below each specific descriptor of the Assessment Anchor is a reference in italics. This reference relates to the PA Academic Standards and helps to link the Assessment Anchor Content Standards back to the Academic Standards.
- **Eligible Content:** The column on the right-hand side of the page underneath each Assessment Anchor is the Eligible Content. Think of this data as an “assessment limit” with the purpose to help teachers identify how deeply they need to cover an Assessment Anchor and/or the range of the content they should teach to best prepare their students for the PSSA. Not all of the Eligible Content is assessed on the PSSA each year, but it shows the range of knowledge from which the test is designed.

**Q: How can teachers, schools, and districts use the Assessment Anchor Content Standards?**

A: The Assessment Anchor Content Standards can help focus teaching and learning because they are clear, manageable and closely aligned to the PSSA. Teachers and administrators will be better informed about which standards will be assessed on state tests. The Assessment Anchor Content Standards should be used in combination with the Assessment Handbooks that include the test blueprints and *Item and Scoring Samplers* from the PSSA. With this degree of information, teachers can more easily embed these skills and knowledge in the larger curriculum. For example, *reading for inference* is a skill that all students at any level need to learn and practice. Staff can share the responsibility for teaching this skill in English, as well as other areas in the curriculum. Even elective and support staff can “adopt” an Assessment Anchor. In this way, an entire school and community can teach and reinforce these critical Reading, Mathematics and Science standards.

**Q: What is the difference between the Assessment Anchor Content Standards and “anchor papers”?**

A: Anchor papers are not the same as the Assessment Anchor Content Standards. To score open-ended items on the PSSA, Pennsylvania educators read a sampling of the student responses on the open-ended items and try to identify responses or “papers” that exemplify the different score points on the scoring guideline. These responses are called “anchor papers” because they “anchor” the scoring process. Once teachers reach consensus on the anchor papers, trained scorers use the anchor papers to score all of the open-ended responses on the PSSA. When the Department releases open-ended items with student work, the anchor papers are often released with the items.

**Q: Will the Assessment Anchor Content Standards ever be revised or changed?**

A: The Assessment Anchor Content Standards are reviewed periodically to ensure that they represent the most important skills and knowledge that should be assessed on the PSSA. The current Assessment Anchor Content Standards that will be used in the 2011-2012 operational assessment are available on the PDE website.

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