



pennsylvania
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

The Pennsylvania System of School Assessment

English Language Arts Item and Scoring Sampler



2023–2024
Grade 4

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INTRODUCTION

General Introduction

The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) provides districts and schools with tools to assist in delivering focused instructional programs aligned with the Pennsylvania Core Standards (PCS). These tools include Academic Standards, Assessment Anchors and Eligible Content (AAEC) documents, assessment handbooks, and content-based item and scoring samplers. This Item and Scoring Sampler is a useful tool for Pennsylvania educators in preparing local instructional programs by providing samples of released test items, of test item types, and scored student responses. The item sampler is not designed to be used as a pretest, a curriculum, or any other benchmark for operational testing.

This Item and Scoring Sampler is available in Braille format. For more information regarding Braille, call (717) 901-2238.

Pennsylvania Core Standards (PCS)

This sampler contains examples of test questions designed to assess the Pennsylvania Assessment Anchors and Eligible Content aligned to the PCS. The Mathematics, Reading, and Writing PSSA transitioned to PCS-based operational Mathematics and English Language Arts assessments starting with the spring 2015 PSSA administration.

The PCS-aligned Assessment Anchors and Eligible Content documents are posted on this portal:

- www.education.pa.gov [Hover over “Data and Reporting,” select “Assessment and Accountability,” and select “PSSA-PA System of School Assessment.” Then select “Assessment Anchors/Eligible Content” on the right side of the screen.]

What Is Included

This sampler contains stimulus reading passages with test questions, Conventions of Standard English questions, and a text-dependent analysis (TDA) prompt that have been written to align to the Assessment Anchors, which are based on the PCS. The sample test questions model the types of items that may appear on an operational PSSA. Each sample test question has been through a rigorous review process to ensure alignment with the Assessment Anchors prior to being piloted in an embedded field test within a PSSA assessment and then used operationally on a PSSA assessment. Answer keys, scoring guidelines, and any related stimulus material are also included. Additionally, sample student responses are provided with each open-ended item to demonstrate the range of responses that students provided in response to these items.

Purpose and Uses

The items in this sampler may be used¹ as examples for creating assessment items at the classroom level. Classroom teachers may find it beneficial to have students respond to the text-dependent analysis prompt question in this sampler. Educators may then use the sampler as a guide to score the responses either independently or together with colleagues within a school or district.

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Item Format and Scoring Guidelines

The 2023 PCS-based PSSA has multiple types of test questions. For grade 4, the types of test questions are multiple-choice (MC) questions, evidence-based selected-response (EBSR) questions, and text-dependent analysis (TDA) prompts.

Multiple Choice: Each of this type of test question has four answer choices. Some MC test questions are based on a stimulus reading passage, while Conventions of Standard English MC test questions are independent of a passage. Each correct response to an MC test question is worth one point.

Evidence-Based Selected-Response: Each two-part EBSR question is designed to elicit an evidence-based response from a student who has read either a literature or an informational text passage. In Part One, which is similar to an MC question, the student analyzes a passage and chooses the best answer from four answer choices. In Part Two, the student utilizes evidence from the passage to select one or more answers based on the response to Part One. Part Two is different from an MC question in that there may be more than four answer options and more than one correct answer. Each EBSR test question is worth either two or three points, and students can receive points for providing a correct response to Part One or for providing one or more correct responses in Part Two.

Text-Dependent Analysis Prompt: The TDA prompt is a text-dependent analysis prompt based on a passage or passage set that each student has read during the test event. There are three response pages in the paper-and-pencil format and up to 5,000 characters in the online format. Both literature and informational text passages are addressed through this item type. Students use explicit and implicit evidence to make inferences leading to a conclusion or generalization in response to the task stated in the prompt. Students construct a well-written analytical essay to communicate inferences and connections to the evidence using grade-appropriate writing skills. The TDA response is scored using a holistic scoring guideline on a 1–4-point scale.

Non-score Considerations: For TDA items, responses can be designated as non-scorable (NS). While every effort is made to score each student response, a response may receive an NS designation if it falls into one of five categories:

Blank – Blank, entirely erased, entirely crossed out, or consists entirely of whitespace

Refusal – Refusal to respond to the task

Non-scorable – In a language other than English, incoherent, illegible, insufficient, unrelated to the passage, or consisting solely or almost solely of text copied from the passage

Off Topic – Makes no reference to the item or passage but is not an intentional refusal

Copied – Consists of text copied from the item and/or test directions

Testing Time and Mode of Testing Delivery for the PCS-Based PSSA

The PSSA is delivered in a traditional paper-and-pencil format as well as in an online format. The estimated time to respond to a test question is the same for both methods of test delivery. The following table shows the estimated response time for each item type.

English Language Arts Item Type	MC	EBSR	TDA
Estimated Response Time (minutes)	1.5	3 to 5	45


During an official test administration, students are given as much additional time as is necessary to complete the test questions.

English Language Arts Grade 4

This English Language Arts Sampler is composed of 3 passages, 5 passage-based MC questions, 2 EBSR questions, 1 TDA prompt, and 2 Conventions of Standard English MC questions.

There are 3 passages in this booklet. The first passage is followed by 5 passage-based MC questions and 2 EBSR questions. The passage pair is followed by 1 TDA prompt. This booklet also contains 2 Conventions of Standard English MC questions.

Each question is accompanied by a table that contains the Assessment Anchor and Eligible Content coding, answer key(s), depth of knowledge, and testing data. Each question is followed by a brief analysis or rationale. The TDA prompt is displayed with the item-specific scoring guideline and examples of student responses with scores and annotations at each scoring level.

The PCS-based PSSA may be administered in paper-and-pencil format or online. As a result, this sampler includes samples of TDA prompt responses in both formats. A sample online response is noted by the symbol .

Item and Scoring Sampler Format

This sampler includes the test directions and scoring guidelines that appeared in previous PSSA English Language Arts assessments. Each MC item is followed by a table that includes the item alignment, the answer key, the depth of knowledge (DOK) level, the percentage² of students who chose each answer option, and a brief answer-option analysis or rationale. The EBSR item is followed by a table that includes the item alignment, the answer key to Part One of the item, the answer key to Part Two of the item, the DOK level, the mean student score, and a brief answer-option analysis for each part of the item. The TDA prompt is followed by a table that includes the item alignment, the DOK level, and the mean student score. Additionally, the *Text-Dependent Analysis Scoring Guideline* is combined with sample student responses representing two examples of each score point to form a practical item-specific scoring guideline. The student responses in this item and scoring sampler are actual student responses; however, the handwriting has been changed to protect the students’ identities and to make the item and scoring sampler accessible to as many people as possible.

Example Multiple-Choice Item Information Table

Item Information	
Alignment	Assigned AAEC
Answer Key	Correct Answer
Depth of Knowledge	Assigned DOK
p-value A	Percentage of students who selected option A
p-value B	Percentage of students who selected option B
p-value C	Percentage of students who selected option C
p-value D	Percentage of students who selected option D
Option Annotations	Brief answer-option analysis or rationale

Example Evidence-Based Selected-Response Item Information Table

Item Information	
Alignment	Assigned AAEC
Answer Key: Part One	Correct Answer
Answer Key: Part Two	Correct Answer
Depth of Knowledge	Assigned DOK
Mean Score	Average Score
Option Annotations	Brief answer-option analysis or rationale

Example Text-Dependent Analysis Prompt Information Table

Alignment	Assigned AAEC	Depth of Knowledge	Assigned DOK	Mean Score	Average Score
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² All p-value percentages listed in the item information tables have been rounded.

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ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS TEST DIRECTIONS FOR READING PASSAGES AND QUESTIONS**Directions:**

On the following pages are the Reading passages and questions.

Directions for Multiple-Choice Questions:

Some questions will ask you to select an answer from among four choices.

For the multiple-choice questions:

- First, read the passage carefully.
- Read each question and choose the best answer.
- Only one of the answers provided is correct.
- You may look back at the passage to help you answer the question.
- Record your choice in the answer booklet.

Directions for Evidence-Based Selected-Response Questions:

Some questions will have two parts and will ask you to select one or more answers in each part.

For the evidence-based selected-response questions:

- Read Part One of the question and choose the best answer.
- You may look back at the passage to help you answer Part One of the question.
- Record your answer to Part One in the answer booklet.
- Only one of the answers provided in Part One is correct.
- Then, read Part Two of the question and choose the evidence to support your answer in Part One. If Part Two tells you to select two answers, be sure to select two answers.
- You may look back at the passage to help you answer Part Two of the question.
- Record your answer or answers to Part Two in the answer booklet.

Directions for Text-Dependent Analysis (TDA) Prompts:

The English Language Arts TDA prompt will ask you to analyze the passage and use evidence from the passage to write an essay.

For the TDA Essay:

- Be sure to read the passage and the TDA prompt carefully.
- Review the Writer’s Checklist to help you plan and organize your response.
- You may look back at the passage to help you write your essay.
- Write your essay in the appropriate space in the answer booklet. If you use scratch paper to write a rough-draft essay, be sure to transfer your final essay to the answer booklet.
- Be sure to check that your essay contains evidence from the passage to support your response.
- Be sure to check your essay for errors in capitalization, spelling, sentence formation, punctuation, and word choice.

PASSAGE 1

Read the following passage about growing pistachios. Then answer questions 1–7 in your answer booklet.

It's Raining Pistachios!

by Gretchen Maurer

With rubber mallets, we whacked at the trunks of the young trees until pistachio nuts dropped down around us, thumping the tarp beneath our feet. I plucked one off the ground, peeled off the hull, and pried the shell open. The raw nut tasted like fresh air and sun-warmed earth. It was worth the eight-year wait.

Before I was born, my parents lived in Turkey. They ate a lot of Turkish pistachios and loved the rich flavor. My dad dreamed of owning a pistachio farm. Later, he and a friend bought 11 acres near the Russian River in northern California. The climate and soil conditions there were perfect for growing pistachios.

Getting Started

On a spring morning when I was 12, my family and I piled out of our truck with picks and shovels, ready to plant the first of 1,500 pistachio trees. As I tamped the earth around one particularly spindly tree, I thought, no way are these dead-looking sticks going to grow anything!

Pistachio trees take 7 to 10 years to produce nuts. For the first 3 years, we watered our trees by hand, using buckets we filled from a 300-gallon water tank hauled around on the back of a truck. Later, we dug a pond and installed a water-saving sprinkler system. During the dry season, it sprays hairlike streams of water between the trees.

Our First Harvest

After eight years, our trees produced our first pistachio harvest. Because young trees are fragile, we couldn't use a machine to shake the nuts from the trees. Instead, we whacked the trunks with rubber-tipped harvesting mallets that looked like giant cotton swabs. A few hundred pounds of pistachios fell onto tarps under the trees during that first harvest.

Going Organic

A few years later, we decided to grow our pistachios organically. Growing organic pistachios means that we do not use pesticides, herbicides, or human-made fertilizers. This requires a lot of work and creative thinking.

To produce healthy nuts, pistachio trees need nitrogen, so we add it to the soil with organic fertilizers. We add a ground-up fish solution to the sprinkler system, and we mix shovelfuls of composted chicken feathers or manure into the soil.

We also plant red clover around the trees; it takes nitrogen from the air and stores it in its roots. Over time, the nitrogen in the roots leaches into the soil and fertilizes the trees.

To control weeds that would steal nutrients from our trees, we hoe around each tree by hand and plow between rows.

We've even had to weed the pond! When weeds threatened to choke our water source, we paddled out in a canoe and pulled the tangly plants into the boat. Sometimes we've drained the water to let goats chomp on the intruding plants.

Crows would devour our pistachios if we let them. So we frighten them away with scarecrows and with screeching sounds made by noise machines. The screeches mimic the calls of hawks, which prey on crows.

10,000 Pounds of Pistachios

Pistachio trees produce a heavy crop of nuts one year and a light crop the next. A good harvest for us these days is 500 times what it was that first year—roughly the weight of a full-grown elephant!

Now that our trees are mature, we can collect the pistachios with a mechanical shaker. Its padded arm clamps onto the trunk of the tree and vibrates it. For about 30 seconds, the branches become a wild blur. Nuts rain down onto a tarp, which rolls up and dumps them onto a conveyor belt. The belt carries them to a large bin. Later, another machine removes the pistachios' rosy outer hulls and dries the nuts.

We haul the hulled nuts to a large processing plant where they're sorted, roasted, and salted. The sorting machine has an electric eye that detects any dark-stained shells and, with a jet of air, blows them into a separate bin. Finally, bagged, labeled, and ready to munch, our pistachios are sold at farmers' markets and in stores.

Today, our hearty trees look nothing like those dead-looking sticks we planted over 30 years ago. As I watch my 12-year-old daughter and her brothers collect stray nuts in buckets, I think of how I underestimated these trees when I was her age. With their branches loaded with clumps of rosy nuts, they couldn't look more beautiful.

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. Read the sentence from the passage.

“The raw nut tasted like fresh air and sun-warmed earth.”

What is the meaning of the simile used in the sentence?

- A. The nut did not taste right.
- B. The nut needed to be roasted.
- C. The nut had an enjoyable taste.
- D. The nut was different than expected.

2. According to information in the passage, why did the author have to wait to try the pistachios?
- A. Pistachio trees can be found only in Turkey.
 - B. Pistachio trees are difficult to grow to full size.
 - C. Pistachio trees produce a heavy crop every year.
 - D. Pistachio trees take seven to ten years to produce nuts.

3. How do the headings support the passage?
- A. They provide the main topic of each section.
 - B. They explain the arguments in each section.
 - C. They ask a question that is answered in each section.
 - D. They summarize the author's opinion in each section.

4. Why does the author at first use a mallet to gather pistachios?
- A. The pistachio trees were too young for a machine.
 - B. Using a machine meant the pistachios would not be organic.
 - C. The farm could not afford to buy a machine.
 - D. Using a machine to gather pistachios was not the traditional method.

Evidence-Based Selected-Response Question

5. This question has two parts. Answer Part One and then answer Part Two.

Part One

Which point does the author make about organic farming?

- A. New methods need to be explored.
- B. More equipment needs to be bought.
- C. New trees need to be planted.
- D. More land needs to be used.

Part Two

Which evidence from the passage **best** supports the answer in Part One? Choose **one** answer.

- A. “Later, we dug a pond and installed a water-saving sprinkler system.”
- B. “Instead, we whacked the trunks with rubber-tipped harvesting mallets that looked like giant cotton swabs.”
- C. “We add a ground-up fish solution to the sprinkler system, and we mix shovelfuls of composted chicken feathers or manure into the soil.”
- D. “Now that our trees are mature, we can collect the pistachios with a mechanical shaker.”

Multiple-Choice Question

6. Read the sentences from the passage.

“So we frighten them away with scarecrows and with screeching sounds made by noise machines. The screeches mimic the calls of hawks, which prey on crows.”

What does the word mimic mean as used in the sentence?

- A. alter
- B. copy
- C. invite
- D. organize

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Evidence-Based Selected-Response Question

7. This question has two parts. Answer Part One and then answer Part Two.

Part One

What is the main idea of the passage?

- A. Organic farming is better than nonorganic farming.
- B. Pistachio farming takes a lot of time and hard work.
- C. California has the best soil and climate for a pistachio farm.
- D. Farmers want their children to continue running their farms.

Part Two

Which evidence from the passage supports the answer in Part One? Choose **two** answers.

- A. “I plucked one off the ground, peeled off the hull, and pried the shell open.”
- B. “After eight years, our trees produced our first pistachio harvest.”
- C. “When weeds threatened to choke our water source, we paddled out in a canoe and pulled the tangly plants into the boat.”
- D. “With their branches loaded with clumps of rosy nuts, they couldn’t look more beautiful.”

PASSAGES 2 AND 3

Read the following passages about the Everglades in Florida. Then answer question 8 in your answer booklet.

A Day in the Everglades

by Sage Levin and Leslie Reed

“Keep your eyes open,” my dad said.

“For what?” I asked.

“Birds and alligators and . . .” he pointed, “panthers.”

As we drove through the Everglades, I looked out the car window. I realized we were surrounded by the “River of Grass” we’d read about. Next to the road was a sign that said “Panther Crossing.” The Florida panther is an endangered species. There are fewer than 80 panthers left in the Everglades. I kept my eyes open. And was I ever amazed by what I saw that day in the Everglades!

First Stop: Swamp walk

The boardwalk wandered through a forest of cypress and palm trees. In one tree, two baby barred owls were being fed by their parents. They turned their huge round eyes to look at us. We stayed quiet, and they didn’t seem afraid. It seemed to me that nothing in the Everglades feared us.

Those barred owl babies were just a preview of what awaited us at the swamp where the boardwalk ended. Cypress forests are the perfect habitat for water-loving animals. Here’s why: These trees grow in water! Sticking up from the water around the base of the trees are “knees,” which are actually part of the roots. And they’re “home sweet home” for water creatures that like to hide. Higher up, wading birds nest in the branches.

All around us were giant birds in beautiful colors—snowy egrets, ibis, herons, and . . .

“What’s that?” I asked as an enormous white bird swooped down.

“Wow! A wood stork,” my mom said.

Wood storks are also endangered, and yet here one was, sweeping its big bill through the water, looking for food.

What I really wanted to see was alligators, which turned out to be pretty easy—my nickname isn’t “reptile eye” for nothing! In the water below us was a huge mother alligator with, yes, nine babies crawling on and around her. They were about the size of my feet and really cute! I also spotted a water snake swimming under a cypress tree. And this was just our first stop!

Second Stop: Boat ride

Some of the water that flows through the Everglades ends up in the Gulf of Mexico. Our tour boat drove slowly—and for good reason. The water is shallow (“if you fall out, you can just walk home,” the tour guide told us), and there are manatees in it.

These mammals are huge (they're sometimes called "sea cows"). They hang out close to the water's surface, where they are often hit by speeding boats. Many manatees die from these accidents; many others bear huge scars from propellers. I kept my eyes open but didn't see any manatees: the water was too brown to see anything in it.

The water isn't brown because it's polluted—it's naturally brown. Here's why: The 10,000 islands are covered with mangrove trees, whose roots reach into the brackish (a mixture of salty and fresh) water. These trees—and their roots—are a great habitat for many animals, both in and out of the water. When the leaves fall into the water, they break down, turning the water brown and becoming food for tiny organisms. Those organisms are eaten by bigger animals like crabs and fish, which are eaten by even bigger animals like birds and . . .

"Dolphins!" Mom yelled. An Atlantic bottle-nosed dolphin leaped out of the water, then another. One even jumped right next to the boat!

Last Stop: Park ranger talk

"The Everglades is in trouble," Ranger Brian Ettling told the crowd. He told us that much of the water we had followed from the River of Grass through the swamps and to the ocean is being drained. People are drying out the land to build houses and farms. Sometimes water is allowed to rush back into drained areas. When this happens, alligator eggs are often washed from their nests. Many animals that depend on the Everglades are losing their homes.

"Not only is this a bad situation for the wildlife, but it's a bad situation for you and me," Ranger Ettling said. Fortunately, the park has a plan to improve the situation in the Everglades.

Ranger Ettling picked up a ball that looked like Earth.

"Restoring the Everglades is a test to see if people can restore the balance of other natural places," he said. Then he threw the ball to me. When I caught it, he said, "If we pass the test, we get to keep the planet." That seemed like a hard test—but definitely worth it.

Hope for the Everglades

by Andrea Delbanco

The Florida Everglades is one of the world's most complex ecosystems. It provides drinking water for millions of people and is home to many threatened animals. It's in trouble. Can it be saved?

The Everglades is the only place where alligators and crocodiles live together in the wild. It is home to many of the world's remaining Florida panthers, whose population is estimated to be between 100 and 200. At least 67 endangered species live there. It's like no place else on Earth. And it's in trouble.

"The Everglades is actually a huge slow-moving river of grass that is fed by rainfall," says Richard Gibbs of the Everglades Foundation. "It needs to have its plumbing system fixed. It was broken when parts of it were drained to make way for houses, businesses, and farming."

In 2000, the government put into action a \$7.8 billion plan to save the Everglades. But 10 years later, the Everglades is still dying. None of the 68 parts of the rescue project is complete. Can the marsh find a way out of this mess?

Get the Water Right

People began draining water from the Everglades in the late 1800s. In 1947, President Harry Truman set aside the area as Everglades National Park. A year later, the government began to build canals to carry the fresh water to the Atlantic Ocean. This dried up much of the Everglades' land.

Today, the water doesn't flow properly and it isn't clean. "It's all about getting enough clean water to the right place at the right time," says Eric Bush, deputy chief for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Everglades Division.

A Not-So-Fast Fix

"It's like trying to put a broken vase back together," says Tom Van Lent, a scientist with the Everglades Foundation. "It's going to take a long time," he added. "There are some things you do for the next generation. This is one of those things."

Text-Dependent Analysis Prompt

8. Read the statement by scientist Tom Van Lent that appears at the end of “Hope for the Everglades.”

“There are some things you do for the next generation. This is one of those things.”

Write an essay analyzing how the information in **both** passages supports Van Lent’s statement. Use evidence from **both** passages to support your response.

Writer’s Checklist for the Text-Dependent Analysis Prompt

PLAN before you write

- Make sure you read the prompt carefully.
- Make sure you have read the entire passage carefully.
- Think about how the prompt relates to the passage.
- Organize your ideas on scratch paper. Use a thought map, outline, or other graphic organizer to plan your essay.

FOCUS while you write

- Analyze the information from the passage as you write your essay.
- Make sure you use evidence from the passage to support your response.
- Use precise language, a variety of sentence types, and transitions in your essay.
- Organize your paper with an introduction, body, and conclusion.

PROOFREAD after you write

- I wrote my final essay in the answer booklet.
- I stayed focused on responding to the prompt.
- I used evidence from the passage to support my response.
- I corrected errors in capitalization, spelling, sentence formation, punctuation, and word choice.

