

ACTFL WRITING PROFICIENCY TESTS
(WPTs and BWTs)
AND RATING DESCRIPTORS

Familiarization Manual

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What are the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines?

The *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines*, first published in 1986, are global characterizations of integrated performance in each of four language skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. The ACTFL Guidelines were based on the language skill level descriptions as used by the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) and the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) and were designed for use in academic environments.

The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines – Writing (Revised 2001) outline four major levels, divided into ten sublevels, of writing proficiency, presented and arranged in a hierarchical order. Each description is a representative, not an exhaustive, sample of a particular range of ability, and each level subsumes all levels below it. These guidelines describe written language ability rating from Superior to Novice Low. The ten sublevels are: Superior, Advanced High, Advanced Mid, Advanced Low, Intermediate High, Intermediate Mid, Intermediate Low, Novice High, Novice Mid, and Novice Low. *The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines – Writing (Revised 2001)* are found in the appendix of this document.

What are ACTFL Writing Proficiency Tests?

All ACTFL writing proficiency tests, (the Business Writing Test -BWT, the General Writing Proficiency Test-WPT, etc.) are standardized tests for the global assessment of functional writing ability in a language. The ACTFL writing proficiency tests measure how well a person spontaneously writes in a language (without access to revisions and/or editing tools) by comparing his/her performance of specific writing tasks with the criteria stated in the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines – Writing (Revised 2001)*.

ACTFL writing tests are carefully constructed assessments with four (WPT) to five (BWT) requests for written responses dealing with practical, social, and/or professional topics that are encountered in informal and formal contexts. The writer is presented with tasks and contexts that represent the range of proficiency levels on the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines-Writing (Revised 2001). The tasks and prompts are written in English with the expectation that the responses be written in the target language.

ACTFL writing tests assesses writing proficiency in terms of the ability to write effectively and appropriately for real-life writing purposes. It does not address when, where, why, or the way in which an individual learned to write. ACTFL writing tests are not an achievement test assessing a writer's acquisition of specific aspects of course and curriculum content, nor is it tied to any specific method of instruction. ACTFL writing tests do not compare one individual's writing to another individual's writing, but rather compares each individual's writing to the descriptors for writing.

What is the ACTFL Rating Scale?

The ACTFL rating scale describes four major levels of language performance. These four major levels are: Superior, Advanced, Intermediate and Novice as shown in the inverted pyramid (see Figure on the following page); each level represents a different profile of functional language ability.

The four major levels are delineated according to a hierarchy of global tasks. This hierarchy is summarized in the rating scale spanning a full range of writing abilities, from Superior (individuals who can produce informal and formal writing on practical, social, and professional topics, treated both abstractly and concretely) to Novice (those who can only produce lists and notes and limited formulaic information on simple forms and documents.)

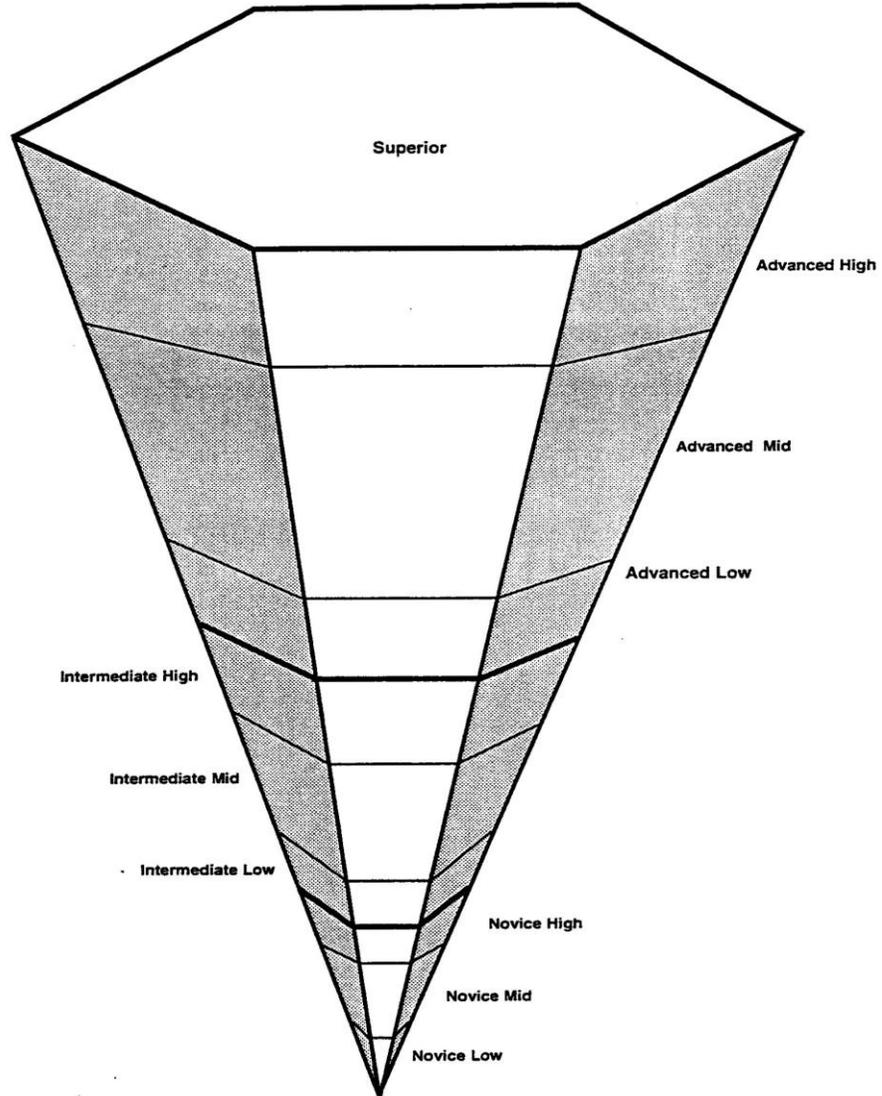
What are the Assessment Criteria?

ACTFL writing proficiency tests are integrative tests, i.e., they address a number of abilities simultaneously and look at them from a global perspective rather than from the point of view of the presence or absence of any given linguistic feature. Linguistic components are viewed from the wider perspective of how they contribute to the overall written sample. In evaluating writing, the following criteria are considered:

- the writing tasks or functions the writer performs,
- the social contexts and specific content areas within which the writer is able to perform the tasks,
- the accuracy of the writing, and
- the length and organization of the written text the writer is capable of producing.

A summary of assessment criteria according to level of proficiency is presented in the following table:

ACTFL Level	Major Level Highlights
Novice (ILR 0)	Can produce lists and notes and limited formulaic information on simple forms and documents. Writing is typically limited to words, phrases and memorized material.
Intermediate (ILR 1)	Can meet a range of simple and practical writing needs, e.g. simple messages and letters, requests for information, notes, etc. Can communicate simple facts and ideas in a loosely connected series of sentences on topics of personal interest and social needs, primarily in the present. Because of vocabulary limitations and errors in basic structures, writing is comprehensible to those accustomed to the writing of non-natives.
Advanced (ILR 2)	Can write routine, informal and some formal correspondence, narratives, descriptions and summaries of a factual nature in all major time frames in connected discourse of a paragraph in length. Writing is comprehensible to all native speakers due to breadth of generic vocabulary and good control of the most frequently used structures.
Superior (ILR 3 or higher)	Can produce informal and formal writing on practical, social and professional topics treated both abstractly and concretely. Can present well-developed ideas, opinions, arguments, and hypotheses through extended discourse. Can control structures, both general and specialized/professional vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, cohesive devices and all other aspects of written form and organization with no pattern of error to distract the reader.



**Inverted Pyramid Representing ACTFL Rating Scale
with Major Ranges and Sublevels**

What is the Format of ACTFL Writing Proficiency Tests?

ACTFL writing proficiency tests are proctored 90-minute tests that consist of an Introduction and a Warm-up followed by four (WPT) or five (BWT) requests for a variety of writing tasks. All responses are open-ended and in the target language. The writing proficiency tests can be written using paper and pencil format or written using a computer accessing the Internet.

Introduction and Warm-up

This section contains directions, information on test-taking strategies, and a warm-up activity at the Novice level. (Directions are also made available in advance of the scheduled testing time.) All directions and prompts are written in English. (Special accommodations may be requested when directions and prompts need to be provided in a language other than English.) Approximately five (5) minutes are allotted for this introductory section of the test.

Writing Prompts

There are four (WPT) or five (BWT) separate requests, each of which encompasses multiple writing tasks, (i.e. descriptive, informative, narrative, and persuasive writing). Each request describes the audience, context, and purpose of the writing task. The prompts that are presented to the writer are designed to elicit writing at the Intermediate, Advanced and Superior levels, across a variety of contexts and content areas. Each request also describes the suggested length of the response (i.e., several sentences, multiple paragraphs, etc.) and suggests a time allotment (i.e., 10 minutes, 25 minutes, etc.) for completing the response to that specific request. The total time to read the directions and complete all the writing tasks is ninety (90) minutes.

How is the Sample Rated?

ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines – Writing (Revised 2001) or the *ILR Language Skill Level Descriptions – Speaking* provide the basis for assigning a global rating. Patterns of strength and weakness in accomplishing the writing tasks are established by the rater. The writing performance is first placed within a major range and then matched to the sub-level description.

Who are the Raters?

ACTFL trained and certified WPT raters are highly specialized language and/or writing professionals who have completed a rigorous training process that concludes with a demonstrated ability to consistently rate writing samples with a high degree of reliability. ACTFL certified raters uphold the highest professional and ethical standards in test rating. ACTFL rater trainers continuously monitor the ratings of ACTFL certified raters as a part of the ACTFL OPI Quality Assurance Program, and all raters participate in ongoing ACTFL sponsored renorming and rater refresher activities throughout the year.

How are ACTFL Writing Proficiency Tests Being Used?

The ACTFL writing proficiency tests are distributed exclusively through Language Testing International (LTI) and are currently being used to evaluate the functional writing ability of individuals for jobs in which there is the need to be able to write in a target language. A broad range of commercial, government and academic customers utilize ACTFL proficiency tests.



ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines Writing

Revised 2001

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INTRODUCTION

The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, first published in 1986, are global characterizations of integrated performance in each of four language skills - speaking, writing, reading, and listening. The ACTFL Guidelines are based in large part on the language skill level descriptions used by the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) and adapted for use in other professional and academic environments.

The ACTFL Speaking Guidelines have been extensively tested and interpreted, owing to their role as the evaluative core of the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) and in the context of research projects, articles, and debates. In 1999, the time had come for them to be reevaluated, revised, refined, with the anticipation of a reworking of the remaining three skills writing, listening, and reading to follow.

This revision of the Writing Guidelines follows the precedent set in the revised guidelines for speaking - they are presented in a top-down fashion (from Superior to Novice) rather than in a bottom-up order, thereby allowing for more positive descriptive statements for each level and sublevel, stressing what language users *can do* with the language rather than what they cannot do. This top-down ordering also manifests more clearly the close link between a specific proficiency level and the next lower level by focusing on a narrower sphere of performance rather than by regarding the expansion of functional tasks and expectations as one moves up the proficiency scale. It must be noted that the Superior level encompasses levels 3, 4, and 5 of the ILR scale. However, the abilities at the Superior level described in these guidelines are *baseline* abilities for performance at that level rather than a complete description of the full range of Superior.

For the two productive skills (speaking and writing), commercial and academic requirements have demonstrated the need for more clearly delineated language proficiency criteria and specific distinctions in performance at the Advanced level (described as 'Limited working proficiency' for level 2 on the ILR scale). The division of the Advanced level into High, Mid, and Low responds to these needs and is consonant with the distinctions made at lower levels of the Writing Guidelines and also in the revised guidelines for speaking.

Most significantly, writing, as discussed in this document, refers to both spontaneous and reflective writing. *Spontaneous* writing does not incorporate sufficient time for revision, rewriting, or clarification and elaboration. *Reflective* writing, on the other hand, affords the writer the time to better plan and organize the written material, and to be fully involved in the entire writing process through rereading, revising, and rewriting. Both types of writing can be evaluated using these guidelines since it is not the *type of writing* but the *product* that is being evaluated. One might anticipate that reflective writing would result in a richer and more accurate sample than spontaneous writing.

As tasks shift upward, the writing, by necessity, becomes more reflective in order to satisfy the demands of the higher levels. Writers become more aware of and more focused on the other, on the reader of the text, and also

on the aims that they have for the reception of the text. In the real world, most writing tasks above the Intermediate level require some degree of reflective writing. At higher proficiency levels, more tools are used and are used more skillfully (proofreading, editing, use of dictionary, spell checks, and other printed and electronic resources). Upper-level writers function as their own editors to enhance the content, style, and impact of their text.

These revisions of the Writing Guidelines are provided as a first step in the revision process. Since language as communication is a constantly evolving phenomenon, we anticipate additional study, discussion, and research on writing itself and on its place in the workplace, classroom, and life. The committee invites the profession to use these guidelines to assess writing proficiency and for the academic community to consider the implications of these revisions on instruction and curricular design. The committee also invites the profession to continue to study, discuss, and carry out research on these writing guidelines so that they can be further refined to more precisely describe writing performance.

Acknowledgments

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We would also like to thank the following committee members and reviewers who helped in the current revision process: Lucía Caycedo Garner, Chantal Thompson, Eileen Glisan, Ray T. Clifford, Seiichi Makino, Martha Herzog, and Pardee Lowe, Jr.

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ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines Writing

Revised 2001

SUPERIOR

Writers at the Superior level are able to produce most kinds of formal and informal correspondence, complex summaries, precis, reports, and research papers on a variety of practical, social, academic, or professional topics treated both abstractly and concretely. They use a variety of sentence structures, syntax, and vocabulary to direct their writing to specific audiences, and they demonstrate an ability to alter style, tone, and format according to the specific requirements of the discourse. These writers demonstrate a strong awareness of writing for the other and not for the self.

Writers at the Superior level demonstrate the ability to explain complex matters, provide detailed narrations in all time frames and aspects, present and support opinions by developing cogent arguments and hypotheses. They can organize and prioritize ideas and maintain the thrust of a topic through convincing structure and lexicon and skillful use of writing protocols, especially those that differ from oral protocols, to convey to the reader what is significant. Their writing is characterized by smooth transitions between subtopics and clear distinctions made between principal and secondary ideas. The relationship among ideas is consistently clear, evidencing organizational and developmental principles such as cause and effect, comparison, chronology, or other orderings appropriate to the target language culture. These writers are capable of extended treatment of a topic that typically requires at least a series of paragraphs but can encompass a number of pages.

Writers at the Superior level demonstrate a high degree of control of grammar and syntax, both general and specialized/professional vocabulary, spelling or symbol production, cohesive devices, and punctuation. Their vocabulary is precise and varied with textured use of synonyms, instead of mere repetition of key words and phrases. Their writing expresses subtlety and nuance and is at times provocative. Their fluency eases the reader's task.

Writers at the baseline of the Superior level will not demonstrate the full range of the functional abilities of educated native writers. For example, their writing may not totally reflect target language cultural, organizational, syntactic, or stylistic patterns. At the baseline Superior level, occasional errors may occur, particularly in low-frequency structures, but there is no pattern. Errors do not interfere with comprehension and they rarely distract the native reader.

ADVANCED-HIGH

Writers at the Advanced-High level are able to write about a variety of topics with significant precision and detail. They can handle most social and informal correspondence according to appropriate conventions. They can write summaries, reports, precis, and research papers. They can also write extensively about topics relating to particular interests and special areas of competence, but tend to emphasize the concrete aspects of such topics. Advanced-High writers can describe and narrate in all major time frames, with good control of aspect. In addition, they are able to demonstrate some ability to incorporate the functions and other criteria of the Superior level, showing some ability to develop arguments and construct hypotheses. They cannot, however, sustain those abilities and may have difficulty dealing with a variety of topics in abstract, global, and/or impersonal terms. They often show remarkable ease of expression when writing at the Advanced level, but under the demands of Superior-level writing tasks, patterns of error appear. Although they have good control of a full range of grammatical structures and a fairly wide general vocabulary, they may not use these comfortably and accurately in all cases. Weaknesses in grammar, syntax, vocabulary, spelling or symbol production, cohesive devices, or punctuation may occasionally distract the native reader from the message. Writers at the Advanced-High level do not consistently demonstrate flexibility to vary their style according to different tasks and readers. Their writing production often reads successfully but may fail to convey the subtlety and nuance of the Superior level.

ADVANCED-MID

Writers at the Advanced-Mid level are able to meet a range of work and/or academic writing needs with good organization and cohesiveness that may reflect the principles of their first language. They are able to write straightforward summaries and write about familiar topics relating to interests and events of current, public, and personal relevance by means of narratives and descriptions of a factual nature. Advanced-Mid writers demonstrate the ability to narrate and describe with detail in all major time frames. Their writing is characterized by a range of general vocabulary that expresses thoughts clearly, at times supported by some paraphrasing or elaboration. Writing at the Advanced-Mid level exhibits some variety of cohesive devices in texts of several paragraphs in length. There is good control of the most frequently used target language syntactic structures, e.g., common word order patterns, coordination, subordination. There may be errors in complex sentences, as well as in punctuation, spelling, or the formation of non-alphabetic symbols and character production. While features of the written style of the target language may be present, Advanced-Mid writing may at times resemble oral discourse or the writing style of the first language. Advanced-Mid writing incorporates organizational features both of the target language or the writer's first language. While Advanced-Mid writers are generally aware of writing for the other, with all the attendant tailoring required to accommodate the reader, they tend to be inconsistent in their aims and focus from time to time on the demands of production of the written text rather than on the needs of reception. When called on to perform functions or to treat topics at the Superior level, Advanced-Mid writers will generally manifest a decline in the quality and/or quantity of their writing, demonstrating a lack of the rhetorical structure, the accuracy, and the fullness of elaboration and detail that would be characteristic of the Superior level. Writing at the Advanced-Mid level is understood readily by natives not used to the writing of non-natives.

ADVANCED-LOW

Writers at the Advanced-Low level are able to meet basic work and/or academic writing needs, produce routine social correspondence, write about familiar topics by means of narratives and descriptions of a factual nature, and write simple summaries. Advanced-Low writers demonstrate the ability to narrate and describe in major time frames with some control of aspect. Advanced-Low writers are able to combine and link sentences into texts of paragraph length and structure. Their writings, while adequate to satisfy the criteria of the Advanced level, may not be substantive. Writers at the Advanced-Low level demonstrate an ability to incorporate a limited number of cohesive devices but may resort to much redundancy and awkward repetition. Subordination in the expression of ideas is present and structurally coherent, but generally relies on native patterns of oral discourse or the writing style of the writer's first language. Advanced-Low writers demonstrate sustained control of simple target-language sentence structures and partial control of more complex structures. When attempting to perform functions at the Superior level, their writing will deteriorate significantly. Writing at the Advanced-Low level is understood by natives not used to the writing of non-natives although some additional effort may be required in the reading of the text.

INTERMEDIATE -HIGH

Writers at the Intermediate-High level are able to meet all practical writing needs such as taking notes on familiar topics, writing uncomplicated letters, simple summaries, and compositions related to work, school experiences, and topics of current and general interest. Intermediate-High writers connect sentences into paragraphs using a limited number of cohesive devices that tend to be repeated, and with some breakdown in one or more features of the Advanced level. They can write simple descriptions and narrations of paragraph length on everyday events and situations in different time frames, although with some inaccuracies and inconsistencies. For example, they may be unsuccessful in their use of paraphrase and elaboration and/or inconsistent in the use of appropriate major time markers, resulting in a loss in clarity. In those languages that use verbal markers to indicate tense and aspect, forms are not consistently accurate. The vocabulary, grammar, and style of Intermediate-High writers essentially correspond to those of the spoken language. The writing of an Intermediate-High writer, even with numerous and perhaps significant errors, is generally comprehensible to natives not used to the writing of non-natives, but gaps in comprehension may occur.

INTERMEDIATE-MID

Writers at the Intermediate-Mid level are able to meet a number of practical writing needs. They can write short, simple communications, compositions, descriptions, and requests for information in loosely connected texts that are based on personal preferences, daily routines, common events, and other topics related to personal experiences and immediate surroundings. Most writing is framed in present time, with inconsistent references to other time frames. The writing style closely resembles the grammar and lexicon of oral discourse. Writers at the Intermediate-Mid level show evidence of control of syntax in non-complex sentences and in basic verb forms, and they may demonstrate some ability to use grammatical and stylistic cohesive elements. This writing is best defined as a collection of discrete sentences and/or questions loosely strung together; there is little evidence of deliberate organization. Writers at the Intermediate-Mid level pay only sporadic attention to the reader of their texts; they focus their energies on the production of the writing rather than on the reception the text will receive. When Intermediate-Mid writers attempt Advanced-level writing tasks, the quality and/or quantity of their writing declines and the message may be unclear. Intermediate-Mid writers can be understood readily by natives used to the writing of non-natives.

INTERMEDIATE-LOW

Writers at the Intermediate-Low level are able to meet some limited practical writing needs. They can create statements and formulate questions based on familiar material. Most sentences are recombinations of learned vocabulary and structures. These are short and simple conversational-style sentences with basic subject-verb-object word order. They are written mostly in present time with occasional and often incorrect use of past or future time. Writing tends to be a few simple sentences, often with repetitive structure. Vocabulary is limited to common objects and routine activities, adequate to express elementary needs. Writing is somewhat mechanistic and topics are limited to highly predictable content areas and personal information tied to limited language experience. There may be basic errors in grammar, word choice, punctuation, spelling, and in the formation and use of non-alphabetic symbols. When Intermediate-Low writers attempt to perform writing tasks at the Advanced level, their writing will deteriorate significantly and their message may be left incomplete. Their writing is understood by natives used to the writing of non-natives, although additional effort may be required

NOVICE-HIGH

Writers at the Novice-High level are able to meet limited basic practical writing needs using lists, short messages, postcards, and simple notes, and to express themselves within the context in which the language was learned, relying mainly on practiced material. The writing is generally writer-centered and is focused on common, discrete elements of daily life. Novice-High writers are able to recombine learned vocabulary and structures to create simple sentences on very familiar topics, but the language they produce may only partially communicate what is intended. Control of features of the Intermediate level is not sustained due to inadequate vocabulary and/or grammar. Novice-High writing is often comprehensible to natives used to the writing of non-natives, but gaps in comprehension may occur.

NOVICE-MID

Writers at the Novice-Mid level are able to copy or transcribe familiar words or phrases, and reproduce from memory a modest number of isolated words and phrases in context. They can supply limited information on simple forms and documents, and other basic biographical information, such as names, numbers, and nationality. Novice-Mid writers exhibit a high degree of accuracy when writing on well-practiced, familiar topics using limited formulaic language. With less familiar topics, there is a marked decrease in accuracy. Errors in spelling or in the representation of symbols may be frequent. There is little evidence of functional writing skills. At this level, the writing may be difficult to understand even by those accustomed to reading the texts of non-natives.

NOVICE-LOW

Writers at the Novice-Low level are able to form letters in an alphabetic system and can copy and produce isolated, basic strokes in languages that use syllabaries or characters. Given adequate time and familiar cues, they can reproduce from memory a very limited number of isolated words or familiar phrases, but errors are to be expected.

