

ACTFL

WRITING PROFICIENCY TEST FAMILIARIZATION MANUAL

AMERICAN COUNCIL ON THE TEACHING OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES | PROFESSIONAL PROGRAMS

3 BARKER AVE, SUITE 300 | WHITE PLAINS, NY 10601-1509 | PH 914-963-8830 | www.actfl.org

WRITING PROFICIENCY TEST FAMILIARIZATION MANUAL

What Is ACTFL?

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) is a national membership organization of foreign language professionals dedicated to promoting and fostering the study of languages and cultures as an integral component of American education and society. ACTFL strives to provide effective leadership for the improvement of teaching and learning of languages at all levels of instruction and in all languages. Its membership of more than 12,000 language professionals includes elementary, secondary, and post-secondary teachers as well as administrators, specialists, supervisors, researchers, and others concerned with language education. ACTFL represents all languages and all levels of language instruction.

What are the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines?

The *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 2012* are descriptions of what individuals can do with language in terms of speaking, writing, listening, and reading in real-world situations in a spontaneous and non-rehearsed context. For each skill, these guidelines identify five major levels of proficiency: Distinguished, Superior, Advanced, Intermediate, and Novice. The major levels Advanced, Intermediate, and Novice are subdivided into High, Mid, and Low sublevels.

These Guidelines present the levels of proficiency as ranges and describe what an individual can do with language at each level, and cannot do at the next higher level, regardless of where, when, or how the language was acquired. Together these levels form a hierarchy in which each level subsumes all lower levels. The Guidelines are not based on any particular theory, pedagogical method, or educational curriculum. They neither describe how an individual learns a language nor prescribe how an individual should learn a language, and they should not be used for such purposes. They are an instrument for the evaluation of functional language ability.

The *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 2012 – Writing* describe the tasks that writers can handle at each level as well as the content, context, accuracy, and discourse types associated with the writing tasks at each level. They also present the limits that writers encounter when attempting to function at the next higher major level.

These Guidelines are the basis for rating the ACTFL Writing Proficiency Test (WPT). The ACTFL WPT assesses the ability to write effectively and appropriately for real-life writing.

WHAT IS THE ACTFL WRITING PROFICIENCY TEST?

The ACTFL Writing Proficiency Test (WPT) is a standardized test for global assessment of functional writing ability in a language. The ACTFL WPT is a vehicle that measures 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 2012 – Writing*.

The ACTFL WPT is a carefully constructed assessment with four prompts for written responses dealing with practical, social, and 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 from Novice to Superior on the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 2012 – Writing*. The tasks and prompts are written in English; the responses are written in the target language.

The ACTFL WPT 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. It is 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. The ACTFL WPT does not compare one writing sample to another, but rather compares each sample to the descriptors for writing.

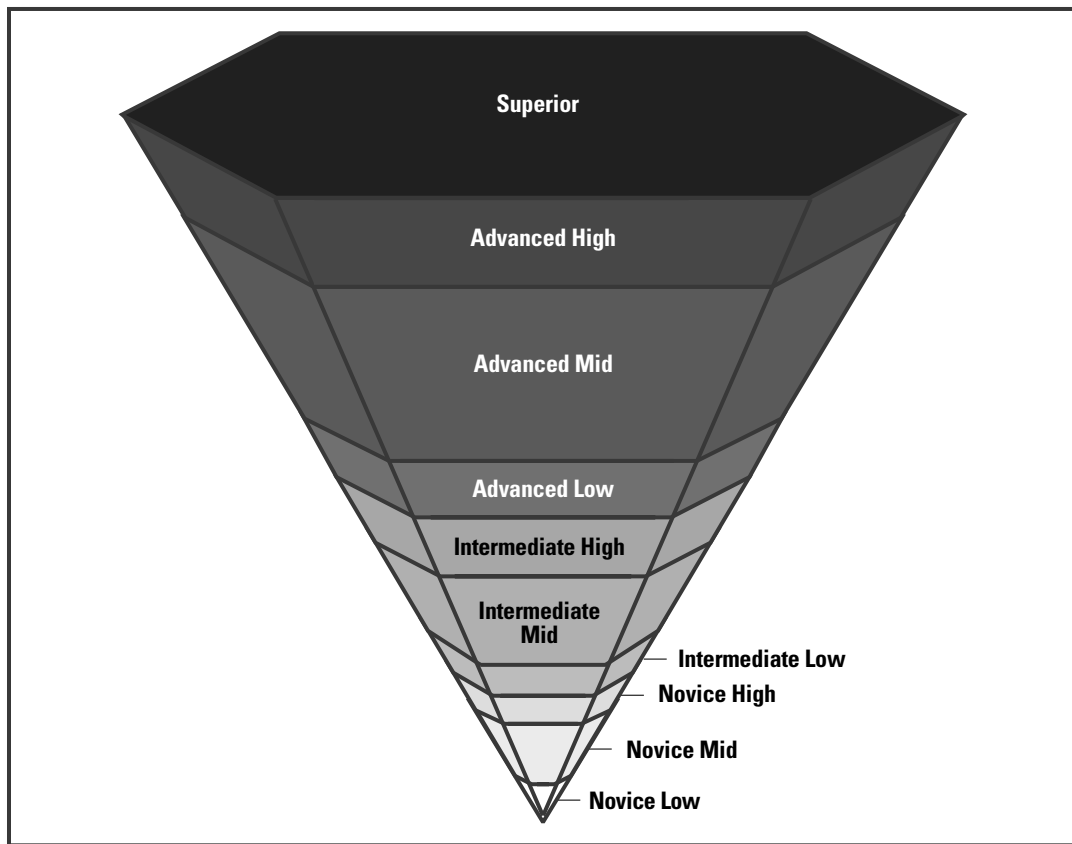
WHAT IS THE ACTFL RATING SCALE?

While the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 2012 – Writing* describe five major levels of written language proficiency (Distinguished, Superior, Advanced, Intermediate, and Novice), the ACTFL Rating Scale (derived from the Guidelines) encompasses four major levels. These are:

Superior
Advanced
Intermediate
Novice

The four major levels are delineated according to a hierarchy of global tasks. This hierarchy is summarized in a 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 produce only lists and notes and limited formulaic information on simple forms and documents). Major borders divide the major levels of the scale (Superior, Advanced, Intermediate, and Novice).

As shown in the inverted pyramid here, each level represents a range of functional language ability.



WHAT ASSESSMENT CRITERIA ARE USED?

The Writing Proficiency Test (WPT) is an integrative test, i.e., it addresses a number of abilities simultaneously and looks 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 functions or global tasks the writer performs
- the social contexts and specific content areas within which the writer performs the tasks
- the accuracy of the writing
- the length and organization of the written discourse the writer produces

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

ACTFL Level	Level Highlights
Superior	<p>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.</p>
Advanced	<p>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.</p>
Intermediate	<p>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.</p>
Novice	<p>Can produce lists, notes, and limited formulaic information on simple forms and documents. Writing is typically limited to words, phrases, and memorized material.</p>

WHAT IS THE FORMAT OF THE ACTFL WPT?

The Writing Proficiency Test is a proctored 90 minute test that consists of an Introduction and Warm-up followed by four requests for a variety of writing tasks. All responses are open-ended and in the target language. The WPT can be written using a 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 ten (10) minutes are allotted for this introductory section of the test.

Writing Prompts

There are four separate prompts, 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 prompt. The four 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. Most prompts will target more than one task associated with one or more levels within the same context.

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 allotted for all four requests is 80 minutes.

ABOUT THE WPT

The ACTFL WPT is appropriate for individual, small group, and large scale testing. By offering the WPT over the Internet, the ACTFL WPT is accessible to test takers in any area of the world where there is reliable Internet availability. Written responses are made available to ACTFL Certified WPT Raters via the Internet.

Taking the ACTFL WPT

Before beginning the WPT, test takers complete a Background Survey and a Self-Assessment. They also receive clear instructions for taking the test. These instructions are delivered in English.

Background Survey: Selecting Topics for Writing

The Background Survey is a questionnaire which elicits information about the test taker's work, school, home, personal activities, and interests. The survey answers determine the pool of prompts from which the computer will randomly select topics for writing tasks. The variety of topics, the types of questions, and the range of possible computer-generated combinations allows for individually designed assessments. Even if two test takers select the same combination of Background Survey responses, the resulting tests will be different.

Self-Assessment: Defining the Level of the WPT

The Self-Assessment provides six different descriptions of how well a person can write in a language. Test takers select the description that they feel most accurately describes their writing ability in the target language. The Self-Assessment choice determines which one of three WPT test forms is generated for the specific individual. The choices made by the test taker in response to the Background Survey and the Self-Assessment ensure that each test taker receives a customized and unique test.

WPT Test Administration & Keyboard Options

The WPT provides detailed test instructions and directions on how to navigate the test. To ensure that the WPT test taker can make the necessary diacritical marks in the target language which are not represented on a standard US keyboard, several keyboard options are available within the test software. Institutions can determine in advance which keyboard options should be made available to their test takers. At the time of the test, the test taker will make a choice based on the options set forth by the client/institution. These options include:

- Virtual Keypad: Test takers can choose to use a virtual keypad during the test that allows access to diacritical marks specific to the target language.
- Language Specific Virtual Keyboard: This option converts the user's keyboard to LTI's virtual keyboard using technology based on a Windows virtual keyboard layout. For example, candidates testing in Arabic will see a representation of an Arabic keyboard on their screen that correlates to the test taker's local keyboard.
- Local Computer Keyboard: This option is for candidates who would prefer to forgo the virtual options and use only the keyboard in front of them. This allows candidates and institutions to access any custom codes already programmed for writing in the target language.
- All of the above.

To ensure that the test taker understands these options, a warm-up grid is provided in advance of the test to allow the candidates to become familiar with the options available. Once the warm-up is completed and the actual test is started, the test taker cannot change the selected keyboard.

The WPT is also available in traditional paper and pencil format and with the same customization and adaptive features as the online version.

WHAT MIGHT AN ITEM LOOK LIKE?

Novice Level – A Novice-level task may ask the writer to supply limited information on a simple form using isolated words or phrases. For example:

NEW STUDENT SURVEY

Complete the following:

Name: _____

Address: _____

Telephone: _____

Date of Birth: _____

Current Classes: _____

Hobbies, Interests: _____

Intermediate Level - An Intermediate-level task may ask the writer for a simple description on a familiar topic.

Advanced Level – An Advanced-level task may ask for paragraph-length narration of a factual nature using appropriate time frames.

Superior Level – A Superior-level task may ask the writer to state and support an opinion and to hypothesize in a cohesive and structured text.

HOW IS THE SAMPLE RATED?

The *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines – Writing* provide the basis for assigning a global rating. Patterns of strength and weakness in accomplishing the writing tasks are established by an ACTFL certified rater. The writing performance is first placed within a major range and then matched to the sublevel description.

WHO ARE THE RATERS?

ACTFL certified WPT raters are highly specialized language professionals who have completed a rigorous training process that concludes with a demonstrated ability to consistently rate samples with a high degree of reliability. ACTFL certified raters uphold the highest professional and ethical standards in test administration and rating.

WHAT IS AN OFFICIAL ACTFL WPT RATING?

Official ACTFL WPT ratings are assigned to those WPTs that are conducted under the supervision of Language Testing International (LTI), the ACTFL Testing Office. Each Official WPT is blindly double rated by two separate certified raters. When a final rating is assigned, an ACTFL WPT Certificate is issued. The terms “ACTFL WPT,” “Official ACTFL WPT,” and the ACTFL Writing Proficiency Test protocol are the property of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. Their use is restricted to those purposes intended by ACTFL.

HOW IS THE ACTFL WPT CURRENTLY BEING USED?

The ACTFL WPT is currently being used for a variety of purposes in the academic, commercial, and government communities.

Because an ACTFL WPT rating provides a common metric for describing an individual's functional ability to write, it serves as a way of providing parity among language programs. WPT ratings may be used for purposes of admission into programs, placement within a language sequence, and determination of the fulfillment of exit or graduation requirements.

Establishing proficiency outcomes in terms of the descriptors contained in the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines provides a framework for the design and development of the writing component of the curriculum for language courses and sequences of language courses. Proficiency testing of students is also used as a means of evaluating the effectiveness of language programs.

Teacher Certification Boards in some states require evidence of written language competency as demonstrated through an Official ACTFL WPT. WPT ratings are used in the business world and in government for purposes of hiring and promotion in multi-lingual positions.

HOW CAN ONE BEST PREPARE FOR THE ACTFL WPT?

Test takers prepare in a variety of ways to take the WPT, depending on their individual writing strengths and weaknesses. The following is a list of general strategies and recommendations to prepare for the WPT:

- Familiarize yourself with the criteria for each of the major levels of the *Proficiency Guidelines 2012*
- If you need to demonstrate writing proficiency at the Advanced Level, for example, practice writing paragraph-length descriptions and narratives about familiar topics, current events, past memories, future plans, etc.
- Write every day. If possible, have your writing reviewed by someone who is able to provide feedback based on the ACTFL Guidelines
- Take a composition course
- Read. Reading not only builds vocabulary, but also provides writing models

WHAT TEST-TAKING TIPS ARE RECOMMENDED?

Recommended test-taking tips:

- Be certain that you understand the context(s) and the purpose(s) of the writing tasks
- Address ALL of the tasks that are included in the prompt(s)
- Be aware of and follow the suggestions for length and organization of written response(s)
- Follow the suggested times allotments

INTERESTED IN SCHEDULING AN ACTFL WPT?

To schedule individual or group ACTFL Writing Proficiency Tests, contact:

Language Testing International (LTI)
ACTFL Testing Office
testing@languagetesting.com
Tel: (914) 963-7110

ACTFL PROFICIENCY GUIDELINES 2012 WRITING

Preface

The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 2012 – Writing describe five major levels of proficiency: Distinguished, Superior, Advanced, Intermediate, and Novice. The description of each major level is representative of a specific range of abilities. Together these levels form a hierarchy in which each level subsumes all lower levels. The major levels Advanced, Intermediate, and Novice are divided into High, Mid, and Low sublevels.

The Guidelines describe the tasks that writers can handle at each level as well as the content, context, accuracy, and

discourse types associated with the writing tasks at each level. They also present the limits that writers encounter when attempting to function at the next higher major level.

These Guidelines can be used to describe written text that is either Presentational (essays, reports, letters) or Interpersonal (instant messaging, e-mail communication, texting). Moreover, they apply to writing that is spontaneous (immediate, unedited) or reflective (revised, edited). This is possible because the Guidelines describe the product rather than the process or purpose of the writing.

The written descriptions of writing proficiency are accompanied online by writing samples illustrating the features of each major level.

The *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 2012 – Writing* may be used for non-profit, educational purposes only, provided that they are reproduced in their entirety, with no alterations, and with credit to ACTFL.

DISTINGUISHED

Writers at the Distinguished level can carry out formal writing tasks such as official correspondence, position papers, and journal articles. They can write analytically on professional, academic, and societal issues. In addition, Distinguished-level writers are able to address world issues in a highly conceptualized fashion.

These writers can use persuasive and hypothetical discourse as representational techniques, allowing them to advocate a position that is not necessarily their own. They are also able to communicate subtlety and nuance. Distinguished-level writing is sophisticated and is directed to sophisticated readers. Writers at this level write to their audience; they tailor their language to their readers.

Distinguished-level writing is dense and complex; yet, it is characterized by an economy of expression. The writing is skillfully crafted and is organized in a way that reflects target-culture thought patterns. At the Distinguished level, length is not a determining factor. Distinguished-level texts can be as short as a poem or as long as a treatise.

Writers at the Distinguished level demonstrate control of complex lexical, grammatical, syntactic, and stylistic features of the language. Discourse structure and punctuation are used strategically, not only to organize meaning but also to enhance it. Conventions are generally appropriate to the text modality and the target culture.

SUPERIOR

Writers at the Superior level are able to produce most kinds of formal and informal correspondence, in-depth summaries, reports, and research papers on a variety of social, academic, and professional topics. Their treatment of these issues moves beyond the concrete to the abstract.

Writers at the Superior level demonstrate the ability to explain complex matters, and to present and support opinions by developing cogent arguments and hypotheses. Their treatment of the topic is enhanced by the effective use of structure, lexicon, and writing protocols. They organize and prioritize ideas to convey to the reader what is significant. The relationship among ideas is consistently clear, due to organizational and developmental principles (e.g., cause and effect, comparison, chronology). These writers are capable of extended treatment of a topic which typically requires at least a series of paragraphs, but can extend to a number of pages.

Writers at the Superior level demonstrate a high degree of control of grammar and syntax, of both general and specialized/professional vocabulary, of spelling or symbol production, of cohesive devices, and of punctuation. Their vocabulary is precise and varied. Writers at this level direct their writing to their audiences; their writing fluency eases the reader's task.

Writers at the Superior level do not typically control target-language cultural, organizational, or stylistic patterns. At the Superior level, writers demonstrate no pattern of error; however, occasional errors may occur, particularly in low-frequency structures. When present, these errors do not interfere with comprehension, and they rarely distract the native reader.

ADVANCED

Writers at the Advanced level are characterized by the ability to write routine informal and some formal correspondence, as well as narratives, descriptions, and summaries of a factual nature. They can narrate and describe in the major time frames of past, present, and future, using paraphrasing and elaboration to provide clarity. Advanced-level writers produce connected discourse of paragraph length and structure. At this level, writers show good control of the most frequently used structures and generic vocabulary, allowing them to be understood by those unaccustomed to the writing of non-natives.

Advanced High

Writers at the Advanced High sublevel are able to write about a variety of topics with significant precision and detail. They can handle informal and formal correspondence according to appropriate conventions. They can write summaries and reports of a factual nature. They can also write extensively about topics relating to particular interests and special areas of competence, although their writing tends to emphasize the concrete aspects of such topics. Advanced High writers can narrate and describe in the major time frames, with solid control of aspect. In addition, they are able to demonstrate the ability to handle writing tasks associated with the Superior level, such as developing arguments and constructing hypotheses, but are not able to do this all of the time; they cannot produce Superior-level writing consistently across a variety of topics treated abstractly or generally. They have good control of a range of grammatical structures and a fairly wide general vocabulary. When writing at the Advanced level, they often show remarkable ease of expression, but under the demands of Superior-level writing tasks, patterns of error appear. The linguistic limitations of Advanced High writing may occasionally distract the native reader from the message.

Advanced Mid

Writers at the Advanced Mid sublevel are able to meet a range of work and/or academic writing needs. They demonstrate the ability to narrate and describe with detail in all major time frames with good control of aspect. They are able to write straightforward summaries on topics of general interest. Their writing exhibits a variety of cohesive devices in texts up to several paragraphs in length. There is good control of the most frequently used target-language syntactic structures and a range of general vocabulary. Most often, thoughts are expressed clearly and supported by some elaboration. This writing incorporates organizational features both of the target language and the writer's first language and may at times resemble oral discourse. Writing at the Advanced Mid sublevel is understood readily by natives not used to the writing of non-natives. When called on to perform functions or to treat issues at the Superior level, Advanced Mid writers will manifest a decline in the quality and/or quantity of their writing.

Advanced Low

Writers at the Advanced Low sublevel are able to meet basic work and/or academic writing needs. They demonstrate the ability to narrate and describe in major time frames with some control of aspect. They are able to compose simple summaries on familiar topics. Advanced Low writers are able to combine and link sentences into texts of paragraph length and structure. Their writing, while adequate to satisfy the criteria of the Advanced level, may not be substantive. Writers at the Advanced Low sublevel demonstrate the ability to incorporate a limited number of cohesive devices, and may resort to some redundancy and awkward repetition. They rely on patterns of oral discourse and the writing style of their first language. These writers demonstrate minimal control of common structures and vocabulary associated with the Advanced level. Their writing is understood by natives not accustomed to the writing of non-natives, although some additional effort may be required in the reading of the text. When attempting to perform functions at the Superior level, their writing will deteriorate significantly.

INTERMEDIATE

Writers at the Intermediate level are characterized by the ability to meet practical writing needs, such as simple messages and letters, requests for information, and notes. In addition, they can ask and respond to simple questions in writing. These writers can create with the language and communicate simple facts and ideas in a series of loosely connected sentences on topics of personal interest and social needs. They write primarily in present time. At this level, writers use basic vocabulary and structures to express meaning that is comprehensible to those accustomed to the writing of non-natives.

Intermediate High

Writers at the Intermediate High sublevel are able to meet all practical writing needs of the Intermediate level. Additionally, they can write compositions and simple summaries related to work and/or school experiences. They can narrate and describe in different time frames when writing about everyday events and situations. These narrations and descriptions are often but not always of paragraph length, and they typically contain some evidence of breakdown in one or more features of the Advanced level. For example, these writers may be inconsistent in the use of appropriate major time markers, resulting in a loss of clarity. The vocabulary, grammar, and style of Intermediate High writers essentially correspond to those of the spoken language. Intermediate High writing, even with numerous and perhaps significant errors, is generally comprehensible to natives not used to the writing of non-natives, but there are likely to be gaps in comprehension.

Intermediate Mid

Writers at the Intermediate Mid sublevel are able to meet a number of practical writing needs. They can write short, simple communications, compositions, and requests for information in loosely connected texts about personal preferences, daily routines, common events, and other personal topics. Their writing is framed in present time but may contain references to other time frames. The writing style closely resembles oral discourse. Writers at the Intermediate Mid sublevel show evidence of control of basic sentence structure and verb forms. This writing is best defined as a collection of discrete sentences and/or questions loosely strung together. There is little evidence of deliberate organization. Intermediate Mid writers can be understood readily by natives used to the writing of non-natives. 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 Low

Writers at the Intermediate Low sublevel 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 word order. They are written almost exclusively in present time. Writing tends to consist of a few simple sentences, often with repetitive structure. Topics are tied to highly predictable content areas and personal information. Vocabulary is adequate to express elementary needs. There may be basic errors in grammar, word choice, punctuation, spelling, and in the formation and use of non-alphabetic symbols. Their writing is understood by natives used to the writing of non-natives, although additional effort may be required. 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.

NOVICE

Writers at the Novice level are characterized by the ability to produce lists and notes, primarily by writing words and phrases. They can provide limited formulaic information on simple forms and documents. These writers can reproduce practiced material to convey the most simple messages. In addition, they can transcribe familiar words or phrases, copy letters of the alphabet or syllables of a syllabary, or reproduce basic characters with some accuracy.

Novice High

Writers at the Novice High sublevel are able to meet limited basic practical writing needs using lists, short messages, postcards, and simple notes. They are able to express themselves within the context in which the language was learned, relying mainly on practiced material. Their writing is focused on common elements of daily life. Novice High writers are able to recombine learned vocabulary and structures to create simple sentences on very familiar topics, but are not able to sustain sentence-level writing all the time. Due to inadequate vocabulary and/or grammar, writing at this level may only partially communicate the intentions of the writer. 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 sublevel can reproduce from memory a modest number of 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 non-native writers.

Novice Low

Writers at the Novice Low sublevel are able to copy or transcribe familiar words or phrases, form letters in an alphabetic system, and 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.

Interested in scheduling an ACTFL WPT?

To schedule individual or group ACTFL Writing Proficiency Tests, contact:

Language Testing International (LTI)

ACTFL Testing Office

testing@languagetesting.com

Tel: (914) 963-7110

**For more information on ACTFL Professional
Program workshops, please contact:**

ACTFL Professional Programs

workshops@actfl.org

For information on certification programs, please contact:

opicert@actfl.org