PRELIMINARY
Proficiency Guidelines C 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 C 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 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 C writing, listening, and reading C to follow.

This revision of the Writing Guidelines follows the precedent set in the revised guidelines for speaking C 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 leaps 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 ALimited 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.
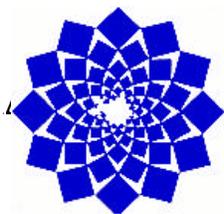
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As tasks shift upward, the writing, by necessity, becomes more reflective in order to satisfy the demands of the higher levels. Writers become more aware of and more focused on the other, on the reader of the text, and also on the aims that they have 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 teaching, learning, and life. The committee invites the profession to use these guidelines to assess writing proficiency and 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.

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
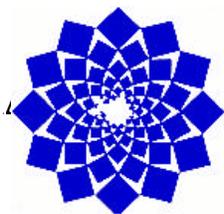
characterized by smooth transitions between subtopics and clear distinctions made between principal and secondary ideas. The relationship among ideas is consistently clear, evidencing organizational and developmental principles such as cause and effect, comparison, chronology, or other orderings appropriate to the target language culture. These writers are capable of extended treatment of a topic which 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
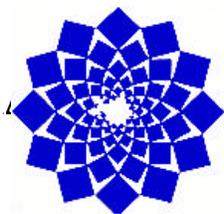
writer, even with numerous and perhaps significant errors, is generally comprehensible to natives not used to the writing of non-natives, but gaps in comprehension may occur.

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.
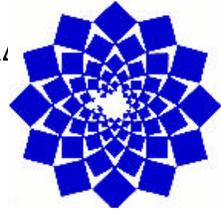
NOVICE-MID

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.
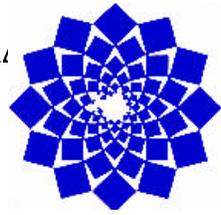
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Summary Highlights

SUPERIOR	ADVANCED	INTERMEDIATE	NOVICE
Superior-level writers are characterized by the ability to	Advanced-level writers are characterized by the ability to	Intermediate-level writers are characterized by the ability to	Novice-level writers are characterized by the ability to
! express themselves effectively in most informal and formal writing on practical, social, and professional topics treated both abstractly as well as concretely. ! present well developed ideas, opinions, arguments, and hypotheses through extended discourse. ! control structures, both general and specialized/professional vocabulary, spelling or symbol production, punctuation, diacritical marks, cohesive devices, and other aspects of written form and organization with no pattern of error to distract the reader.	! write routine informal and some formal correspondence, narratives, descriptions, and summaries of a factual nature. ! narrate and describe in major time frames, using paraphrase and elaboration to provide clarity, in connected discourse of paragraph length. ! express meaning that is comprehensible to those unaccustomed to the writing of non-natives, primarily through generic vocabulary, with good control of the most frequently used structures.	! meet practical writing needs C e.g., simple messages and letters, requests for information, notes C and ask and respond to questions. ! create with the language and communicate simple facts and ideas in a loosely connected series of sentences on topics of personal interest and social needs, primarily in the present. ! express meaning through vocabulary and basic structures that is comprehensible to those accustomed to the writing of non-natives.	! produce lists and notes and limited formulaic information on simple forms and documents. ! recombine practiced material supplying isolated words or phrases to convey simple messages, transcribe familiar words or phrases, copy letters of the alphabet or syllables of a syllabary, or reproduce basic characters with some accuracy. ! communicate basic information.
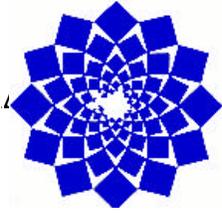
Glossary

argument C a type of discourse that is intended to persuade or convince; because of the polemic nature of argument, one can expect to find a significant number and variety of connectors that facilitate elaboration, detailing, and the incorporation of examples, for a cogent and cohesive organization of ideas.

aspect *C* a verbal category that refers to some characteristic of the activity or state of a verb; indicates if an action or state is viewed as completed or in progress (*I went / I was going*), instantaneous or enduring (*The sun came out / The sun was shining*), momentary or habitual (*They vacationed at the shore / They used to vacation at the shore*). Aspect is often indicated by prefixes, suffixes, infixes, phonetic changes in the root verb, use of auxiliaries.

circumlocution C an indirect or roundabout compensation strategy to express a thought or meaning when appropriate lexical items are unknown.

cohesive devices *C* language components that link ideas for seamless flow within and among sentences and paragraphs, such as relative pronouns, pronoun substitutions [subject and object], coordinating and subordinating conjunctions, adverbs of time, subordinate clauses.

distract the native reader C errors (misspelling, incorrect grammar, incorrect lexical items, faulty structure) appearing in writing samples that focus the attention of the native language user on the form rather than on the meaning.

elaboration C adding more detail and specificity in the exposition of a particular idea.

fluency *C* a flow in the written language as perceived by the reader, made possible by clarity of expression, the acceptable ordering of ideas, use of vocabulary and syntax appropriate to the context, with words, phrases, and idiomatic expressions that go together by common lexical convention.

formal/informal writing C features of writing (format, punctuation, choice of vocabulary) that reflect different audiences and purposes for the communication. For example, in informal writing, the use of contractions and colloquialisms, direct discourse, generic vocabulary; in formal writing, the use of honorifics, indirect discourse, specific and thematically appropriate vocabulary. See also *tailoring of writing.*

functions C also called *task universals* or *global tasks,* this latter particularly referring to communicative tasks (descriptive, informative, narrative, persuasive, and/or hypothetical writing) that have been identified as the key criteria for a given level of proficiency.

functional writing skills C what an individual is able to do with written language, for example, those writing capabilities that are appropriate to satisfy communication needs for specific writing purposes (personal,
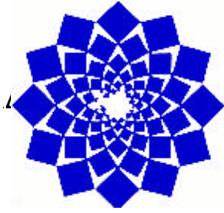
practical,   academic, professional, creative writing, etc.)

generic vocabulary C   those words and expressions that serve equally well in a variety of categories and contexts. Such vocabulary is readily intelligible to the general public, but does not normally deepen meaning. (See also *specialized vocabulary).*

low-frequency structures C complex language constructions that are seldom utilized or required in a given language in its less formal expression, but often necessary in the most formal types of writing geared to high-level communicative tasks such as persuading and hypothesizing. Examples of such constructions are some compound tenses (AShe would have thought@), the sequencing of tenses (AIf they had considered the implications, they would have opted for another solution@), and compounded subordination (AGiven the clear and present danger, and in view of the significant loss already suffered by the villagers, the council decided to ...@).

non-alphabetic symbols C those elements of meaning that appear in both Roman and non-Roman languages that indicate stress, punctuation, syllabification; including ideographs and pictograms C *Un hombre muy tímido entr*ó; *The first- and second-year students are here*; ﴾ ? $ ﴿ * + 8.

oral discourse C a style of language that contains the characteristics of informal spoken language, i.e., redundancy, repetition, fragments, contractions, simple sentences.

paragraph C a specific unit of thought that reflects a structural and thematic chronology (beginning, middle, end), usually organized through a group of related sentences that encompass a sense of unity and completeness. Often, and especially in academic formats, the paragraph contains a topic sentence (a clear statement of the principal idea or thesis), and the sentences that follow help explain or contribute to the elaboration of the topic sentence.

paraphrase C stating the contents of a passage or text in similar language without quoting the original text or using the language verbatim.

redundancy C linguistic and structural components that serve the same purpose within the communication; also superfluous words (a verbatim quotation), repetition (This is my father. I work for my father.), or unnecessary verbiage (Two years ago in 1999, ….).

reflective writing C written material that is planned and organized through rereading, revising, editing, and rewriting. The writer has time to plan and organize the written material, to be fully involved in the entire writing process. This type of writing is generally necessary to produce texts at high proficiency levels. Writers C and most decidedly high-level writers C will generally produce higher-level written texts through reflective writing than through spontaneous writing.
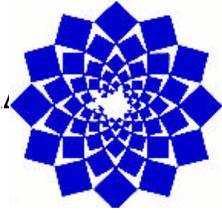
***specialized vocabulary* C** words, expressions, technical terms, etc., that are meaningful to members of a specific group or field of study or endeavor, but not to the general public. While sometimes referred to as *jargon,* a specialized vocabulary channels meaning and makes the information more precise, more focused, and at times more profound. (See also *generic vocabulary*)

***spontaneous writing* C** writing that is produced when preparation and production need to occur at the same time; it does not allow sufficient opportunity for revision, rewriting, or editing.

***symbol production* C** the production of ideographs or pictograms (as in Chinese, Japanese), or non-alphabetic elements of a given language.

***time frames* C** general periods in time: *past, present,* or *future,* but not necessarily tenses that indicate those specific times. For example, future time can be indicated by use of the future tense, but also by the present tense: *I* am going *to the movies this afternoon.* Likewise, past time can be indicated by use of the present tense: Elle vient de partir; Ella acaba de salir [*She has just left*].

***tailoring of writing* C** selecting language, information, and ideas, and ordering these components, to create a particular effect in the reader, whether to convince or persuade, to incite or anger, to comfort, or to summon support or action, etc. Such tailoring also includes the use of appropriate variables in register, i.e., in expository writing vs. information writing.

***verbal markers* C** those morphological, phonological and/or semantic elements that indicate differences in tense [*ran / run / have run;hablo / habló* (I speak / he spoke)]; person C (I eat / He eats); auxiliaries [Elle est sortie hier soir (*She went out last night)* / Elle a sorti la poubelle (*She took the trash can out*)]; and aspects of verbs [They ran / They were running].