

## How to Interpret the Alabama High School ELA Performance Level Descriptors

The Alabama ELA Performance Level Descriptors (PLDs) were developed based on student performance data from the ACT ELA tests: English, reading, and writing. In the initial phase of development, cut scores were established based on the ACT combined ELA score, which is the average of a student’s scores from the three ELA tests. The cut scores created four performance levels (referred to as Levels 1–4).

PLDs were then developed by Alabama ELA teachers for Levels 2–4. Teachers studied items that had a high likelihood of being answered correctly by students in each performance level. Based on the analysis, the teachers articulated the knowledge, skills, and practices consistently demonstrated by students who performed in each score level on the ACT ELA Tests. The knowledge and skill statements in the following PLDs describe what a student is *likely* able to do. The PLDs are not a guarantee or exhaustive list of what an individual student *can* or *will* do.

The ELA PLDs are arranged into three separate tables. Each table represents the ELA knowledge, skills, and practices in one ELA strand of the [2016 Revised Alabama Course of Study](#) (*Reading, Language, and Writing*). The ELA knowledge, skills, and practices in each strand are further organized into clusters that provide insights into how ELA skills and practices can be developed in the classroom. In nearly all cases, these clusters also conveniently align to reporting categories on the ACT ELA subject tests.<sup>1</sup>

Alabama High School ELA Performance Level Descriptors: Reading			
Based on the 2016 Revised Alabama Course of Study for English Language Arts.			
	Level 2 (ACT ELA Score 16-19)	Level 3 (ACT ELA Score 20-25)	Level 4 (ACT ELA Score 26-36)
<b>Key Ideas and Details:</b> Students read texts closely to determine central ideas and themes; summarize information and ideas accurately; and read closely to understand relationships and draw logical inferences and conclusions, including understanding sequential, comparative, and cause-effect relationships.	<p>Students performing at Level 2 demonstrate a range of skills for understanding key ideas and details in literary and informational texts. For example, they can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make inferences about a character’s motivation or other key details in a narrative.</li> <li>• Understand a key detail that is clearly stated in the text.</li> <li>• Understand a metaphor used to emphasize a character’s attributes.</li> <li>• Draw a conclusion that is strongly supported by many details in the text.</li> <li>• Determine the main idea of a paragraph or the whole text when the idea is clearly stated.</li> </ul>	<p>Students performing at Level 3 demonstrate a range of skills for understanding key ideas and details in literary and informational texts. For example, in addition to the skills at Level 2 they can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make connections between concepts or characters.</li> <li>• Make inferences about key ideas implied by the author in an informational text.</li> <li>• Understand the effect or outcome of actions in a narrative.</li> <li>• Understand the impact of the author’s choice of elements in a text including setting, actions, and character introduction</li> <li>• Locate and understand a key detail in the text.</li> <li>• Determine the implied main idea of a paragraph or the whole text.</li> </ul>	<p>Students performing at Level 4 demonstrate a range of skills for understanding key ideas and details in literary and informational texts. For example, in addition to the skills at Level 3 they can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make connections across the text between different phrases that have similar meaning.</li> <li>• Make inferences about complex relationships (e.g., the cause of an event or phenomenon) in narratives and informational texts.)</li> <li>• Use evidence from the text to make a detailed interpretation about an important concept in the text.</li> <li>• Locate and paraphrase explicitly stated details in particularly dense texts.</li> <li>• Determine the implied main idea in an information-dense paragraph.</li> </ul>
<b>Craft and Structure:</b> Students determine word and phrase meanings, analyze an author’s word choice rhetorically, analyze text structure, understand authorial purpose and perspective, and analyze characters’ points of view. They interpret authorial decisions rhetorically and differentiate between various perspectives and sources of information.	<p>Students performing at this level can use knowledge about the author’s craft and the text structure in order to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Infer the meaning of a somewhat common word or phrase based on context.</li> <li>• Determine the author’s primary purpose for including a detail.</li> <li>• Determine whether a textual detail supports a given statement drawn from the text.</li> <li>• Interpret a figure of speech, drawing on context to determine meaning.</li> <li>• Identify the narrator in a literary text.</li> <li>• Identify key elements that shape the narrator’s perspective.</li> </ul>	<p>In addition to the skills at Level 2, students performing at this level can use knowledge about the author’s craft and the text structure in order to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Infer the meaning of a multiple-meaning word or phrase based on context when a less common meaning is intended, or the word could refer to different people or things in the passage.</li> <li>• Analyze and comprehend the overall structure or purpose of the text and determine how the author’s choices impact meaning of the text</li> <li>• Connect evidence to support author’s claim</li> <li>• Determine the primary purpose of a key sentence or paragraph within the structure of the text.</li> <li>• Analyze the author’s credibility in an informational text using information contained in the text.</li> </ul>	<p>In addition to the skills at Level 3, students performing at this level can use knowledge about the author’s craft and the text structure in order to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Infer the meaning of a multiple-meaning word or phrase based on context when a less common meaning is intended, or the word could refer to different people or things in a more complex passage.</li> <li>• Interpret an author’s use of a word, phrase, or point of view to determine how the choice of language subtly shapes the meaning of the text (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement)</li> <li>• Interpret an author’s point of view or purpose to determine the persuasiveness (and effectiveness?) of the argument</li> <li>• Analyze and comprehend the overall structure or purpose of a more complex text and determine how the author’s choices impact meaning of the text</li> <li>• Analyze an author’s argument to determine which claim a given piece of evidence supports</li> <li>• Determine the primary purpose of a key sentence or paragraph within the structure of a more complex text.</li> <li>• Analyze the function of a key rhetorical element (e.g., a description or example) within the structure of the text.</li> <li>• Determine the point of view associated with a thought or statement and interpret the tone in a complex narrative.</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> The cluster “Vocabulary Acquisition and Use” in the Language strand is not an ACT reporting category, and the four clusters of the “Text Types and Purposes” section in the Writing strand (“Ideas and Analysis,” “Development and Support,” “Organization,” and “Language Use and Conventions”) are not headings in the *Course of Study* but rather refer to the four reporting categories on the ACT writing test.

<p><b>Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:</b> Students understand authors' claims, differentiate between facts and opinions, and use evidence to make connections between different texts that are related by topic. Some items will require students to analyze how authors construct arguments, evaluating reasoning and evidence from various sources.</p>	<p>Students performing at this level can integrate knowledge and ideas from texts in order to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify an author's claim in a text when it is clearly stated.</li> <li>• Determine similarities between two related texts.</li> <li>• Draw inferences about two different authors' perspectives and points on which they would agree</li> <li>• Compare the portrayal of characters in two literary narratives.</li> </ul>	<p>In addition to skills at Level 2, students performing at this level can integrate knowledge and ideas from texts in order to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delineate the author's specific claims and evidence used to support those claims.</li> <li>• Differentiate between facts and reasoned judgements.</li> <li>• Analyze ways in which two texts serve different rhetorical purposes.</li> <li>• Analyze elements that are structurally or conceptually similar in two passages.</li> <li>• Compare how two texts present information and analyze similarities and differences in their authors' purposes or interpretations.</li> <li>• Evaluate information in multiple texts to answer a question or solve a problem</li> <li>• Determine the main purpose of an informational text with a specialized purpose (e.g., literary criticism) and academic language.</li> <li>• Analyze the effect on meaning produced by a specific detail in a narrative text.</li> </ul>	<p>In addition to skills at Level 3, students performing at this level can integrate knowledge and ideas from texts in order to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Succinctly summarize an author's claim.</li> <li>• Anticipate how an author would respond to a reader's objection or counterclaim.</li> <li>• Differentiate between facts and reasoned judgments in more complex texts.</li> <li>• Integrate and evaluate the reasoning of arguments and specific claims within and across texts, including validity and sufficiency of evidence</li> <li>• Compare how two texts present information and analyze the relevance of the information to a given topic.</li> <li>• Determine the main difference between the central idea of two related texts.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity:</b> Students read and comprehend literary and informational texts in the appropriate range of text complexity for grades 11-CCR.</p>	<p>Students performing at this level can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read and comprehend literary and informational text with scaffolding.</li> </ul>	<p>Students performing at this level can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read and comprehend moderately complex literary and informational text without scaffolding.</li> </ul>	<p>Students performing at this level can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read and comprehend complex literary and informational text without scaffolding.</li> </ul>

## Alabama High School ELA Performance Level Descriptors: Language

*Based on the 2016 Revised Alabama Course of Study for English Language Arts.*

	Level 2 (ACT ELA Score 16-19)	Level 3 (ACT ELA Score 20-25)	Level 4 (ACT ELA Score 26-36)
<p><b>Conventions of Standard English Grammar, Usage, and Mechanics:</b> Students apply an understanding of the conventions of Standard English grammar, usage, and mechanics to revise and edit text.</p>	<p>Students performing at Level 2 demonstrate some command of the conventions of standard English grammar, usage, and punctuation. For example, with limited consistency they can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recognize subject-verb agreement when there is some text between the subject and verb.</li> <li>Use pronouns correctly.</li> <li>Use appropriate prepositions in simple contexts.</li> <li>Recognize obvious disturbances in sentence structure (e.g., awkward-sounding fragments, fused sentences, lack of parallelism within a simple series of words or phrases)</li> <li>Determine the best location to place an adverb in a sentence.</li> <li>Use commas to correctly punctuate a non-restrictive/inessential phrase in a simple sentence.</li> </ul>	<p>Students performing at Level 3 demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar, usage, and punctuation. For example, in addition to the skills at Level 2, with some consistency they can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recognize and correct subject-verb agreement when there are some elements that may present challenges (e.g., a prepositional phrase directly after the subject).</li> <li>Recognize and correct disturbances in sentence structure (e.g., sentences with faulty placement of phrases, faulty coordination and subordination of clauses, lack of parallelism, sentence fragments that are more subtle)</li> <li>Correctly form a sentence using a simple, parallel construction (e.g., items in a list).</li> <li>Use conjunctions to form compound objects or predicates.</li> <li>Understand how commas are used to create clarity in a sentence (e.g., nonessential elements, introductory clauses or phrases).</li> <li>Correctly form possessive adjectives and pronouns.</li> </ul>	<p>Students performing at Level 4 demonstrate thorough command of the conventions of standard English grammar, usage, and punctuation. For example, in addition to the skills at Level 3 they can consistently:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensure subject-verb agreement in challenging situations (e.g., when the subject-verb order is inverted or when the subject is a noun phrase, noun clause, or indefinite pronoun)</li> <li>Recognize and correct subtle disturbances in sentence structure (e.g., dangling or misplaced modifiers where the intended meaning is clear but misused, faulty subordination of clauses/errors that result in a run-on sentence).</li> <li>Use punctuation, including semicolons, colons, and dashes, to create sophisticated sentences.</li> <li>Recognize and correct unnecessary punctuation.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Knowledge of Language:</b> Students demonstrate effective language use through ensuring precision and concision in word choice and maintaining consistency in style and tone.</p>	<p>Students performing at this level use knowledge of language to make somewhat effective choices for meaning or style and to comprehend more fully. For example, with limited consistency they can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Delete redundant and wordy material when the problem is contained within a single phrase.</li> <li>Revise obviously awkward or clumsy writing to improve clarity.</li> <li>Establish a straightforward sentence pattern for effect.</li> <li>Correctly use common phrases that take a conventional/idiomatic preposition (e.g., “similar to” rather than “alike to”)</li> </ul>	<p>Students performing at this level use knowledge of language to make effective choices for meaning or style and to comprehend more fully. For example, with some consistency, in addition to the skills at Level 2 they can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Delete or revise redundant and wordy material when the content of the entire sentence or paragraph must be considered.</li> <li>Recognize and correct expressions that deviate from the formality of the context.</li> <li>Vary sentence patterns for meaning.</li> <li>Correctly use idiomatic phrases (e.g., “just south of” rather than “about south of”).</li> </ul>	<p>Students performing at this level use knowledge of language skillfully to make sophisticated choices for meaning or style and to comprehend more fully. For example, in addition to the skills at Level 3 they can consistently:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Delete or revise redundant and wordy material in sophisticated sentences with academic or technical vocabulary when the content of the paragraph must be considered.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Vocabulary Acquisition and Use:</b> Students determine or clarify the meaning of unknown general academic and domain-specific words and phrases. They demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings when reading and writing.</p>	<p>Students performing at this level demonstrate understanding of familiar and some general academic vocabulary. For example, with limited consistency, they can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Determine meaning of general academic words and phrases based on the context of the sentence.</li> <li>Determine meaning of familiar multiple-meaning words based on the context of the sentence.</li> <li>Interpret simple figurative language.</li> </ul>	<p>Students performing at this level demonstrate understanding of general academic and domain-specific vocabulary, as well as the ability to determine the meaning of words, phrases, and figurative language. For example, with some consistency, in addition to the skills at Level 2 they can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Determine meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words based on the context of the sentence or paragraph.</li> <li>Clarify connotations of words with similar denotations.</li> <li>Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.</li> <li>Use general academic vocabulary and some domain-specific vocabulary.</li> </ul>	<p>Students performing at this level demonstrate sophisticated understanding of general academic and domain-specific vocabulary, as well as the ability to determine meaning of words, phrases, and figurative language in complex text. For example, in addition to the skills at Level 3 they can consistently:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Determine meaning of a word or phrase when the vocabulary and syntax are sophisticated.</li> <li>Use sophisticated academic and domain-specific vocabulary.</li> <li>Analyzes nuances of connotation in words with similar denotations.</li> </ul>

## Alabama High School ELA Performance Level Descriptors: Writing

Based on the 2016 Revised Alabama Course of Study for English Language Arts.

		Level 2 (ACT ELA Score 16-19)	Level 3 (ACT ELA Score 20-25)	Level 4 (ACT ELA Score 26-36)
<b>Production of Writing:</b> Students apply their understanding of the rhetorical purpose and focus of a piece of writing to develop a topic effectively and use various strategies to achieve logical organization, topical unity, and general cohesion.		<p>Students performing at Level 2 apply their understanding of the specific purpose in writing to develop a topic and organize the text. For example, with limited consistency, they can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recognize a topic by choosing whether to add information and determine the best place to add it.</li> <li>Improve cohesion in and between paragraphs by adding an effective concluding sentence to a body paragraph.</li> <li>Identify an effective introduction sentence in a paragraph with a straightforward topic.</li> <li>Identify transition words such as <i>first, next, finally</i>, to build cohesion in a paragraph.</li> <li>Select words that accomplish a specific rhetorical purpose (e.g., emphasize a specific aspect of a topic).</li> </ul>	<p>Students performing at Level 3 apply their understanding of the specific purpose in writing to develop a topic and organize the text. For example, in addition to the skills at Level 2 they can with some consistency:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop a topic by choosing whether to add information and determine the best place to add it when the decision is more subtle.</li> <li>Improve cohesion within paragraphs by using words and phrases that express logical relations (e.g., <i>however, although</i>).</li> <li>Determine the purpose of a specific piece of information or detail within the whole text.</li> </ul>	<p>Students performing at Level 4 apply their understanding of the specific purpose in writing to develop a topic and organize the text. For example, in addition to the skills at Level 3 they can consistently:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop a topic by choosing whether to add information and determine the best place to add it when the writing is complex.</li> <li>Improve cohesion within paragraphs by crafting effective transition sentences that logically develop the flow of information in complex paragraphs.</li> <li>Improve cohesion within paragraphs by using words and phrases that express logical relations (e.g., <i>nevertheless, furthermore</i>) when the syntax is more complex.</li> <li>Determine whether a piece of writing has met a sophisticated and specific purpose.</li> </ul>
<b>Text Types and Purposes</b>	<b>Ideas and Analysis:</b> Students generate productive ideas and engage critically with multiple perspectives on the given issue. They understand the issue they are invited to address, the purpose for writing, and the audience. They generate ideas that are relevant to the situation.	Students performing at Level 2 can write an argumentative text that recognizes multiple perspectives on a substantive topic. The text may establish a claim that shows minimal clarity in thought and purpose, establishes a limited or tangential context for analysis of the issue and other perspectives/counterclaims about the issue, and provides a limited analysis.	Students performing at Level 3 can write an argumentative text that engages with multiple perspectives on a substantive topic. The text establishes a knowledgeable claim that shows some clarity in thought and purpose; creates a relevant context for analysis of the issue and other perspectives/counterclaims about the issue; and recognizes implications, complexities and tensions, and underlying values and assumptions.	Students performing at Level 4 can write an argumentative text that productively and often critically engages with multiple perspectives on a substantive topic. The text clearly establishes a claim that shows precision in thought and purpose; creates a thoughtful context for analysis of the issue and other perspectives/counterclaims about the issue; and examines implications, complexities and tensions, and underlying values and assumptions.
	<b>Development and Support:</b> Students discuss ideas, offer rationale, and bolster an argument. They explain and explore their ideas, discuss implications, and illustrate through examples. They help the reader understand their thinking about the issue.	Students performing at this level show an attempt to develop ideas and support claims with evidence, but evidence (when present) is overly general or simplistic. Reasoning and illustration may be somewhat repetitious or imprecise.	Students performing at this level can develop ideas and support claims with some relevant evidence, but sometimes evidence is somewhat general or simplistic. Reasoning and illustration attempt to clarify the argument and address the counterclaim but may be somewhat repetitious or imprecise.	Students performing at this level can develop ideas and support claims fairly and thoroughly with relevant persuasive evidence that deepens insight into the topic. Reasoning and illustration are well integrated and enhance the force of the argument. Claims point out the strengths and limitations of multiple perspectives while considering concerns, values, and possible biases with enriched ideas and analysis.
	<b>Organization:</b> Students organize ideas with clarity and purpose. Organizational choices are integral to effective writing. They arrange their essay in a way that clearly shows the relationship between ideas, and they guide the	The writing of students performing at this level exhibits basic organization. The text attempts to logically group ideas together. Transitions between and within paragraphs are limited and may clarify the relationship among ideas. Texts provide a simplistic introduction and conclusion.	The writing of students performing at this level exhibits clear organization. The overall shape of the text reflects an emergent controlling idea or purpose. Ideas, reasons, and evidence are logically grouped and sequenced. Transitions between and within paragraphs clarify the relationships among ideas, including those associated with different perspectives. Texts culminate in a concluding statement that follows from and supports the argument presented.	The writing of students performing at this level exhibits skillful organization. The text is unified by a controlling idea and clear purpose, and a logical sequencing of ideas contributes to the overall effectiveness of the writing. Transitions between and within paragraphs consistently clarify the relationships among ideas. Texts culminate with a skillful concluding statement that unifies the argument.

	reader through their discussion.			
	<p><b>Language Use and Conventions:</b> Students use written language to convey arguments with clarity. They make use of the conventions of grammar, syntax, word usage, and mechanics. They are also aware of their audience and adjust the style and tone of their writing to communicate effectively.</p>	<p>Students performing at this level use language that is basic and conveys meaning somewhat clearly. Word choice is general and imprecise. Sentence structures show limited variety. Distracting errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics are often present in the writing, but they generally do not interfere with understanding.</p>	<p>Students performing at this level use language that conveys meaning with clarity. Word choice is adequate and sometimes precise. Sentence structures are clear and show some variety. The writing attempts to establish and maintain a style and tone appropriate for the purpose. While errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics are present, they rarely interfere with understanding.</p>	<p>Students performing at this level use language that enhances the overall effect of the writing. Word choice is precise and often nuanced. Sentence structures are clear and varied; link the major sections of the text; create cohesion; and clarify the relationships between claims, reasons, evidence, and counterclaims. The writing establishes and maintains a style and tone appropriate for the purpose. A few minor errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics may be present, but they do not interfere with understanding.</p>