

PAUL ENGLE “GLORY OF THE SENSES” SCORING RUBRIC

Part of Paul Engle’s success as head of the Iowa Writer’s Workshop was his uncanny ability to perceive the ethereal quality of potential and talent in prospective students. Engle knew as well as anyone that recognizing effective writing is far from an exact science; it has something to do with a visceral reaction to the work—a gut instinct.

To balance this impossibility of objectively measuring stylistic success with the need for equity and clear expectations in the judging process, this writing evaluation rubric has been constructed to guide the evaluation of student work. Each student essay is, in essence, a memoir of an Iowa experience; judges, therefore, are evaluating papers with similar purpose. Students might develop their Iowa memoir in a variety of ways and, quixotic though it may be, this rubric is designed to evaluate the relative success of each author’s stylistic approach.

The following rubric considers two aspects to student writing: the stylistic or expressive success of the writing (“The Artistic Evaluation”) and the mechanical or grammatical correctness of the essay (“The Conventions Evaluation”). The combined score from the two parts of the rubric will reflect the overall assessment of each essay. While it is possible that judges may select a winner who was not equally successful in both aspects of the rubric, no essay which was wholly unsuccessful in either aspect of writing will meet the challenge.

The “Artistic Evaluation” counts for six (6) points and the “Conventions Evaluation” for three (3) points for a possible total score of nine (9) points. The guiding logic for this difference in value is that, while good communication dictates a control of the conventions of language, Engle himself would certainly have valued artistic excellence over mere mechanical correctness.

Though students may have used the class activities contained in the contest materials to create their essay, no teacher corrections or remarks should be on this final draft.

As they read and evaluate these essays, judges are urged to:

1. **Read supportively to recognize what each student writer does well.** Tenth graders are developing their writing skills in different ways and at different paces. Sift for excellence and be open to inspired moments in otherwise average essays.
2. **Avoid applying formulaic or narrow standards.** As narratives rather than more formal essays, these memoirs will take differing forms. Some will be strictly chronological, others might manipulate time. Some will employ a traditional “five-paragraph” format with introductory paragraph, others may open “in medias res”. No single expectation of format should be applied; measure the success of the writing by its effect on the reader, not by its adherence to a predetermined structure. Further, no single type of error, however personally infuriating, should be automatically disqualifying (for example: a student’s confusion over a possessive “its” versus the contraction “it’s”, use of “alot” instead of “a lot”, employment of a coordinating conjunction like “and” at the beginning of a sentence, etc.)
3. **Each tier of the rubric represents a range of achievement.** Within every scoring category, even those essays earning a six, there will be variation. Seek essays that

reflect high achievement, but do not insist on perfection. Trust your gut, as Engle did, and be willing to reward essays with scores that represent their dominant impression, despite momentary lapses or discrete flaws.

The Artistic Evaluation Rubric

This contest asks students to evoke a memory of Iowa through sensory detail and description, therefore, essays earning at the highest end of the scale immerse the reader in the memory of the student writer—the reading experience becomes a “glory of the senses”. High-scoring essays give the impression of organizational control without resorting to base formula, of imaginative creativity without devolving into chaotic whimsy. Essays at the highest end of the scale contain polished, well-considered prose that could be considered ready for publication in a magazine or newspaper.

- 6** Memoirs earning a score of six offer rich detail throughout that powerfully evokes an Iowa memory. The sensory description within the essay should provide the memory with illustrative substance and eloquently relate the tone, or emotional attitude, the author has toward this memory. The organization of ideas in this essay allows the reader to clearly follow the events without relying on predictable formula or robotic transitions. Word choice is vivid and precise, and the author deftly uses syntax variety and complexity to guide their reader’s experience. The essay reflects a talent and ability that is well advanced for a student in the tenth grade, and the style of the prose reveals a unique voice that is memorable.
- 5** Memoirs scored as a five describe an Iowa memory well, with moments of powerful clarity or insight. The writing, with only occasional lapses, creates a world that is clearly described and invested with emotion. The organization is logical and easy to follow, though less effortless or subtle than higher-scoring essays. Word choice is effective and correct and sentence structure is appropriately varied and complex. The dominant impression is of an author talented for their age and grade in school.
- 4** Essays earning a four effectively describe an Iowa memory, with momentary lapses in focus or intensity. Description of the events and characters provides an image and emotional tone that the audience can feel they have understood, but perhaps not “experienced” in the way that more effective writing can transport the reader. Details, though sufficient, tend to be less vivid or evocative than those contained in essays scored as a 5 or 6. Organization is present and logical, but may rely too much on obvious, predictable structures or transitions. The diction and syntax are correct but would benefit from greater variety or complexity. The memoir leaves the reader with an impression of a writer who is adequate to their age and stage in school.
- 3** Memoirs that score a three tell a story but rely more on summary of events rather than detailed description. The reader may be aware of the author’s tone, but the emotional impression is as likely to be the result of a direct instruction rather than evoked through description or word choice. Organization is present but largely formulaic or predictable, leaving the reader with an impression of an itemized list rather than a conjured experience. Word choice and sentence structure may be less varied or sophisticated than more effective essays, but are generally correct. While

there may be moments that reflect the artistic potential of the author, essays that are scored as a three leave the impression of an author still developing their skills.

- 2 Memoirs that earn a two tell their story in a straight-forward, factual manner. Scant attention to descriptive detail or emotional insight results in a superficial or generic evocation of the memory. Organization is attempted but may become confusing at times. Word choice within an essay scoring a two is unsophisticated or repetitive and terms may be occasionally misused. Sentence structure may feel monotonous or awkward and occasional errors such as sentence fragments or run-ons cause distractions. Memoirs at this level reflect writing that is below grade level expectations.
- 1 Memoirs earning a score of one may contain an Iowa memory, but with little development or description. There is a clear lack of organizational control making the story difficult to follow and the purpose of the writing difficult to ascertain. Word choice is simplistic and may contain several misunderstandings of words or phrases. Sentence structure does not vary and may contain frequent errors. The elements of effective writing are far below grade-level expectations in an essay with a score of one.
- 0 Memoirs earning a score of zero do not, as the prompt explicitly requires, focus on a memory set in Iowa. Even well-written essays whose setting and substance are not based in Iowa cannot be considered successful for this program.

The Conventions Evaluation Rubric

For artistic expression to be viable, the artist must be in control of their medium. When the artistic medium is language, the successful author is one who adheres to the conventions of language except when deviation from the rule serves the artistic intent. Trite as it may be, the aphorism applies: “You have to know the rules before you can break them.”

- 3 Memoirs scored as a three for conventions denote essays that are nearly flawless in terms of spelling, grammar, and punctuation, though rare errors may occur, notably where highly technical rules govern English language usage. No single error should result in an essay being scored below a three. In addition, students may occasionally deviate from standard rules of grammar or spelling when artistically viable (for example: words that are intentionally misspelled or syntax that is intentionally convoluted to evoke dialect or characterization; sentence fragments employed to emphasize a stark point, etc.). Students who experiment effectively outside the bounds of standard English without causing damage to the overall narrative should be rewarded for their poetic courage rather than punished for their technical misdemeanors. Essays earning a score of three for conventions reflect a powerful, though not necessarily perfect, control of the conventions of language.
- 2 Memoirs earning a score of two in conventions reflect essays that are generally correct with regards to spelling, grammar, and punctuation with occasional flaws. While these flaws may be obvious or consistent enough to take note, they do not generally interfere with understanding of the author’s purpose or ideas. Further

revision should have clarified these proofreading errors and might have elevated the essay. Essays earning a score of two for conventions reflect a developing control for the conventions of language and/or a need for more diligent editing.

- 1** Memoirs earning a score of one on the conventions scale contain frequent errors in spelling, grammar, and/or punctuation. These errors create a distraction for the reader and interfere with understanding the essay. If, while reading the essay, there are a few (or more) places where the judge needs to reread a sentence or paragraph to understand what was intended and what went grammatically awry, that is an essay earning a conventions score of one. These essays reflect an inadequate control of the conventions of language or a disregard for their importance.
- 0** Essays earning a score of zero on the conventions scale have consistent and pervasive errors in spelling, grammar, or punctuation that obscure meaning and frequently make it nearly impossible to understand the author's intent. These essays reflect a lack of understanding of the conventions of language that cannot be explained by sloppy proofreading.

