Understanding ACT ELA Scores

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The ACT® English language arts (ELA) score measures overall performance on the ACT English, reading, and writing tests. The ELA score weights the English, reading, and writing scores approximately equally and is therefore reported only for students who take all three tests. In this brief, we explain how the ELA score is calculated and present information for interpreting the score.

How Are ACT ELA Scores Calculated?

To calculate the ELA score, ACT first calculates the number of questions answered correctly for the English and reading tests. These two number-correct scores are then converted to scale scores, which range from 1 to 36. The conversion of number-correct scores to scale scores varies across ACT test forms because of slight differences in the difficulty of different forms.
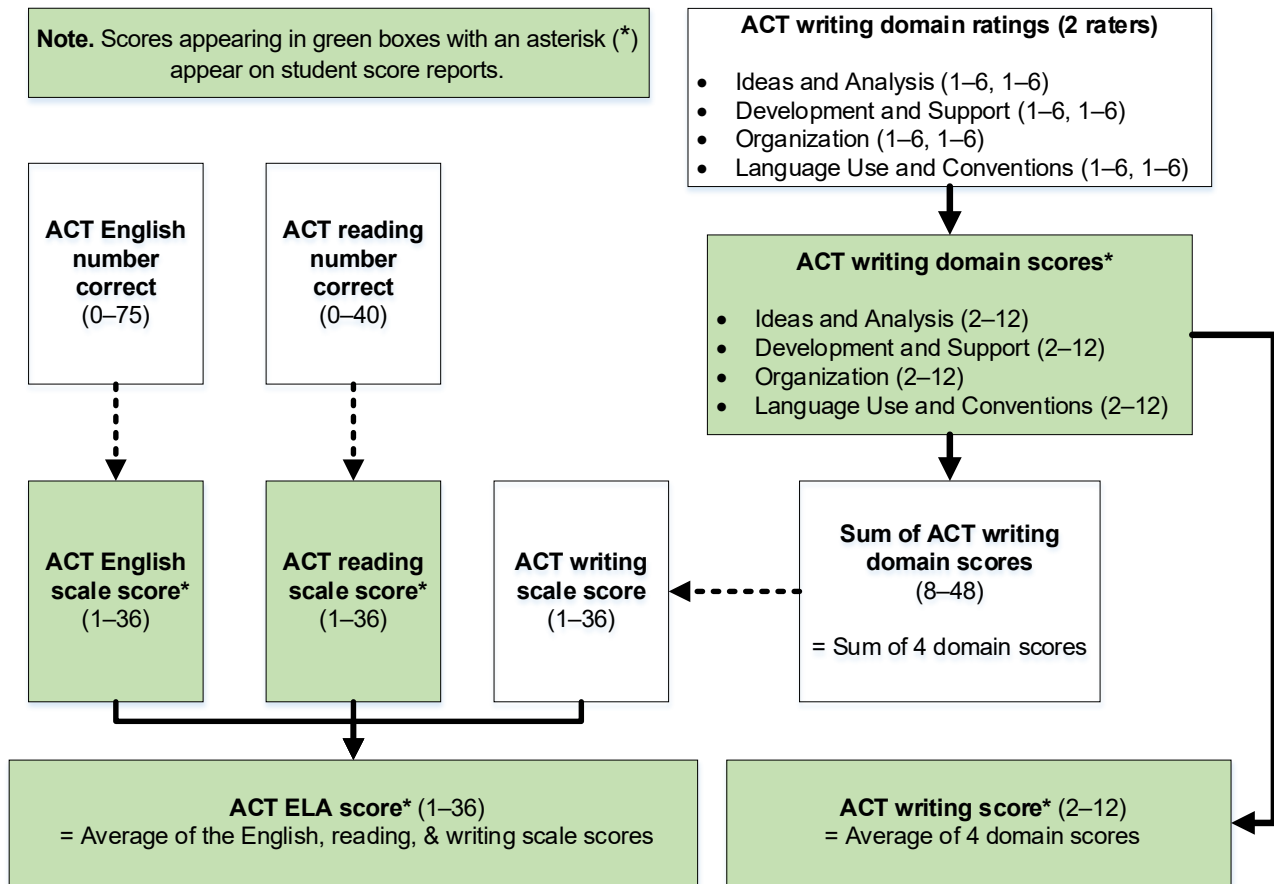
Next, two trained raters independently score the ACT writing test. Each rater provides a rating (ranging from 1 to 6) for each of the four writing domains. For each domain, the rater scores are then summed to obtain the four domain scores, which range from 2 to 12. The four domain scores appear on student score reports along with a writing score (which is calculated as the average of the four domain scores).

The four domain scores are also summed to obtain an overall writing score ranging from 8 to 48. As with the English and reading tests, there may be slight differences in the difficulty of writing prompts across ACT test forms. Therefore, before the ACT ELA score is calculated, the sum of the domain scores is transformed to the writing scale score. This places the writing score on a 1-to-36 scale like the English and reading scales. Unlike the English and reading scale scores, the writing scale score does not appear on student score reports.

Figure 1 below summarizes how ACT ELA scores are calculated. In the figure, simple calculations (sums or averages) are represented by solid black arrows. Score conversions are represented by dashed black arrows. It is important to keep in mind that the conversion of number-correct scores to scale scores may vary across ACT test forms and that scale scores are needed to adjust for slight differences in difficulty across test forms. The process ACT uses to determine how number-correct scores should convert to scale scores is known as *equating* and is described in greater detail in the *ACT Technical Manual* (ACT, 2022).

Once the scale scores are known for the English, reading, and writing tests, the ACT ELA score is calculated as the simple average of the three scale scores, rounded to the nearest whole number. ACT ELA scores may range from 1 to 36.

Figure 1. ACT ELA Score Calculation

Note. Scores appearing in green boxes with an asterisk (*) appear on student score reports.

ACT writing domain ratings (2 raters)
- Ideas and Analysis (1–6, 1–6)
- Development and Support (1–6, 1–6)
- Organization (1–6, 1–6)
- Language Use and Conventions (1–6, 1–6)

ACT English number correct (0–75)

ACT reading number correct (0–40)

ACT writing domain scores*
- Ideas and Analysis (2–12)
- Development and Support (2–12)
- Organization (2–12)
- Language Use and Conventions (2–12)

ACT English scale score* (1–36)

ACT reading scale score* (1–36)

ACT writing scale score (1–36)

Sum of ACT writing domain scores (8–48)
= Sum of 4 domain scores

ACT ELA score* (1–36)
= Average of the English, reading, & writing scale scores

ACT writing score* (2–12)
= Average of 4 domain scores

Note. Averages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

How Are ACT ELA Scores Interpreted?

The ACT College Readiness Benchmark for ELA is 20. Students who score at or above the ELA Benchmark are likely to do well in first-year English Composition I and social science courses in history, psychology, sociology, political science, and economics (Radunzel et al., 2017). ACT research has also documented the relationship between ACT ELA scores and the probabilities of earning a C or higher, a B or higher, and an A in first-year English and social science courses (Allen et al., 2017).

ACT writing scale scores tend to be lower than ACT English and reading scale scores. Among students who had an ELA score and completed high school in 2023, the average scale scores were highest for reading (19.2), followed by English (17.6) and writing (16.0). The average ELA score was 17.6 (ACT, 2023).

Note that the writing score that is provided on student score reports is the average of the four writing domain scores and that it ranges from 2 to 12. National ranks for ELA scores and the writing score are provided on student score reports and are available online.

References

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