



NSCAS NEBRASKA STUDENT-CENTERED
ASSESSMENT SYSTEM

Sample Constructed Response Items

NSCAS ELA 2025–2026

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Introduction

Constructed Response (CR) items are questions that ask students to write their own answers, rather than choosing from given options. CR items allow for better assessment of certain indicators than typical multiple-choice items, providing students, parents, and teachers a deeper understanding of the mastery of the knowledge and skills described in Nebraska's English Language Arts (ELA) Standards.

At the 2025 Item Writing Workshop (IWW), participants developed CR items targeting some writing indicators for grades 4, 7, and 8. This document features a sample set of those items for professional learning or classroom use. The remainder of the CR items will be field tested in the 2026 NSCAS General ELA assessment.

Guide to the Samples

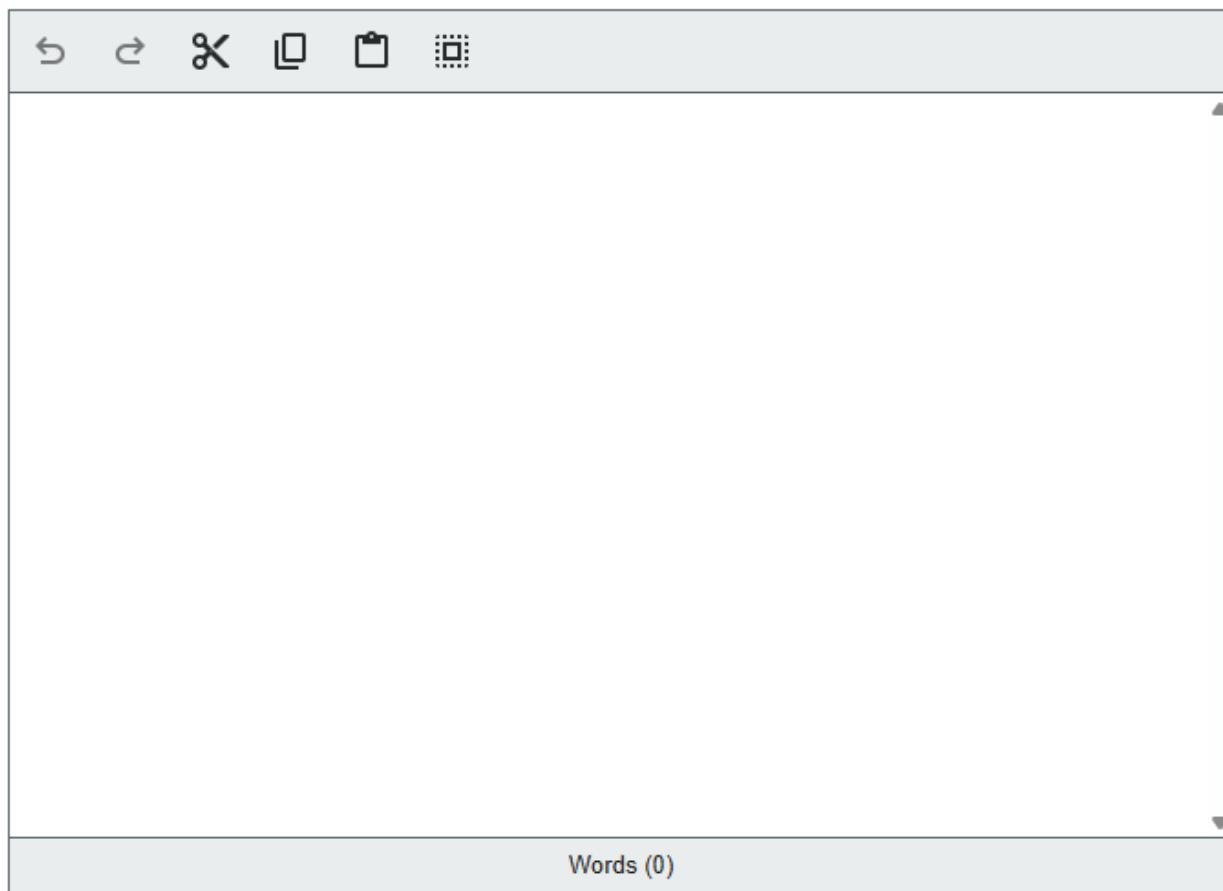
Achievement Level Descriptor

Each CR item assesses only one Achievement Level Descriptor (ALD). If a sample CR item assesses only part of an ALD, the assessed part is underlined in this section here.

Item

This is the content the student sees. Items include directions (in bold), a passage representing student writing, and a stem—a sentence or two detailing the task. The passages are intended to model student writing and are presented without visuals, citations, or other text features.

Not shown with each sample is the response area that will accompany it. This is the field in which test takers will type their responses. The response area is shown below. Note the tool bar at the top, with the following functions: Undo, Redo, Cut, Copy, Paste, and Select All. Hovering over each icon will display its function name.



Rubric

Each item has a rubric that will be used for scoring; students will not see the rubric. The rubric describes the characteristics of a response worth 2 points (full credit), 1 point (partial credit), and 0 points and reflects the expectations of the ALD.

The rubric describes only features of writing that are in the target ALD. Other skills, such as grammar, mechanics, and typing proficiency, are not explicit factors in scoring. These would only affect a score if they were so poor as to interfere with the communication of ideas.

Any text that is not written in English will not be scored; therefore, any response written entirely in a language other than English will automatically receive a score of 0.

Sample Responses

In addition to the rubric, scorers will use sample responses. Two samples are provided for each score point level. The 2-point sample responses are not intended to be exemplars of the highest quality; they may contain weaknesses but would still earn two points. Perfectly written responses that would clearly earn full credit are not included as samples because they would not be very informative for scorers. Likewise, the 0-point samples may show some characteristics of an appropriate response but do not meet the requirements for earning partial credit. Nonsense or incoherent responses are not included here.

Each sample response includes a rationale to explain why the response warrants the designated score.

Grade 4 Constructed Response Sample Items

Sample 4.1

LA.4.W.3.d — Advanced:

Provide a reflective and well-developed conclusion related to the creative or expressive event or experience.

Item

Jessie is writing a story. Read these paragraphs from the end of her story.

Rosa held the box tightly. She did not want to drop it. She and her dad walked across the road to the big pond behind Mr. Cooper's house. They wanted to put the turtle across the road because that's where it was trying to go when they found it.

They chose a shady spot under a big tree near the edge of the pond. Rosa placed the box on the ground. She gently lifted the turtle out of the box and put it in the grass. The turtle started walking to the pond, and it looked happier in the grass than it did in the road.

"Goodbye," Rosa said to the turtle. "Don't go back in the road." _____

Jessie wants to add a conclusion. Write 1–2 sentences that would give the story a strong ending and show what Rosa thinks or feels.

Rubric

Points	Criteria
2 points	The response effectively concludes the story and reflects on the main character's experience.
1 point	The response attempts to conclude the story but may have lapses in clarity, focus, or in reflecting on the main character's experience.
0 points	The response fails to bring effective closure to the story or fails to appropriately reflect on the main character's experience.

Sample Responses

Score	Sample Response	Rationale
2 Points	Even though she never saw the turtle again, Rosa was happy that she was able to return the turtle to its home that day.	This conclusion is reflective and clearly ties back to Rosa's feelings about the event. It shows Rosa's satisfaction and personal connection to helping the turtle, which demonstrates closure and fulfills the expectation of a reflective, well-developed conclusion.
2 Points	Rosa smiled because she had found a safe space for the turtle away from the road.	This response effectively concludes the story by connecting Rosa's actions to her emotions. It reflects on her positive feelings about ensuring the turtle's safety, providing closure and reinforcing the theme of care and protection.
1 Point	Rosa had saved the turtle, at least for now.	This conclusion attempts closure but is not reflective. It acknowledges Rosa's actions but falls short in showing how she feels or what she thinks. "At least for now" suggests uncertainty but doesn't clearly connect to Rosa's emotions.
1 Point	The turtle dove into the pond. Rosa and her dad smiled and waved goodbye to it.	This response brings some closure by showing the turtle's safe return. The mention of Rosa and her dad smiling suggests positivity, but it does not clearly describe what Rosa thinks or feels.
0 Points	Rosa had a nice day with her dad.	This response fails to connect meaningfully to the event described in the story. It shifts focus away from the main experience and does not reflect Rosa's thoughts or feelings about helping the turtle.
0 Points	As soon as Rosa and her dad left, the turtle walked right back toward the road.	This response undermines the purpose of Rosa's actions and does not meaningfully reflect on her experience. Instead of providing closure or showing Rosa's feelings, it reverses the resolution of the story.

Sample 4.2

LA.4.W.4.a — On-Track:

Introduce a topic or text clearly, state an opinion, and develop a structure that includes reasons and/or evidence.

*Item***Read the draft of Charlie's opinion essay about spring.**

_____ The other seasons really can't compare. Spring is a fresh, beautiful gift after a cold, gray winter.

The sunnier days and mild temperatures of spring allow people to spend more time outdoors. When people go outside, they are more active and get more exercise. Springtime just makes everyone feel better. If it rains, that's okay because those rain showers allow plants to grow.

Springtime brings new life with it. The trees bud, bloom, and then burst with bright green leaves. Beautiful flowers bloom all around, and baby birds hatch in their nests. Spring is like a new beginning. It's the best season of them all.

Charlie wants to add an introduction. Write 1–2 sentences that could go in the blank to clearly introduce the topic.

Rubric

Points	Criteria
2 points	The response clearly introduces the topic of the essay.
1 point	The response attempts to introduce the topic but may have lapses in clarity, focus, or purpose.
0 points	The response fails to introduce the topic of the essay.

Sample Responses

Score	Sample Response	Rationale
2 Points	The best time of the year is spring!	This sentence introduces spring simply but directly as the essay's topic and clearly states the opinion that it is the best season.
2 Points	There are many reasons why I think spring is the best season.	The sentence clearly states the topic and the writer's opinion, while also signaling that reasons will follow. This creates a clear structure and effectively introduces the essay.
1 Point	Spring is a nice time.	This response mentions spring as a season but does not include an opinion or a clear topic statement for an essay.
1 Point	I like spring.	The sentence shows a preference but lacks a clear reason or introduction to the essay's topic.
0 Points	I go outside.	This response does not mention spring or relate to a season.
0 Points	I have a dog.	This sentence is off-topic and does not address the prompt about the best time of the year.

Sample 4.3

LA.4.W.4.d — Developing:

Provide a brief concluding statement related to the opinion.

*Item***Read the paragraphs from Mateo's opinion essay about kindness.**

Kindness is important. An act of kindness can be very simple. It could be carrying a neighbor's packages or helping a younger child tie their shoe. It can also be as easy as smiling or saying a kind word.

Acts of kindness are good for everyone, not just the person receiving the kindness! Doing something kind makes people feel calmer and happier. They also feel more connected to others, have better friendships, and enjoy better health.

Best of all, kindness spreads from person to person. One kind act leads to another and another until the whole community is doing kind things for one another. _____

Mateo wants to restate his opinion in a conclusion. Write 1–2 sentences that could go in the blank to make a good conclusion for the essay.

Rubric

Points	Criteria
2 points	The response concludes the essay and is related to the opinion.
1 point	The response attempts a conclusion but has minor lapses in focus or purpose.
0 points	The response fails to provide a conclusion related to the opinion of the essay.

Sample Responses

Score	Sample Response	Rationale
2 Points	Being kind makes the world a better place.	This directly restates the essay's opinion, reinforces its positive message, and clearly concludes the piece with a broad, related statement about kindness.
2 Points	Being kind is cool!	This provides a clear, opinion-based conclusion. Though brief, it connects to the essay's theme and restates the central belief that kindness is positive and desirable.
1 Point	Everyone likes kind people.	This statement connects to the topic but is limited in scope. It suggests a reason but doesn't fully restate or conclude the essay's main opinion about the value of kindness.
1 Point	How could you be kind today?	This question relates to kindness but shifts focus from restating the opinion to addressing the reader. It works as a closing but lacks a clear restatement of the essay's stance.
0 Points	Acts of kindness can be very simple.	This repeats an idea already in the body of the essay rather than providing closure. It fails to serve as a true conclusion or restatement of the opinion.
0 Points	That's how kindness spreads.	This echoes the essay's last point but doesn't clearly restate the opinion or provide a concluding statement. It reads like a continuation, not closure.

Sample 4.4

LA.4.W.5.a — On-Track:

Introduce a topic clearly and group related information into paragraphs and sections including text features, illustrations, and/or multimedia elements.*Item***Read the draft of Sofia's essay about sleep.**

Experts agree that kids need sleep. They say that elementary school kids should get nine to eleven hours of sleep each night. That means that a student who wakes up at 7:00 AM for school should be asleep by about 9:00 PM.

Based on these guidelines, do you get enough sleep? If not, you are not alone. About 30% of kids do not get the right amount of sleep. However, there are many excellent reasons to try to get more sleep.

A good night's sleep improves learning, mood, and memory. It also helps students pay attention at school. That's why kids who get enough sleep often do well in the classroom.

Sofia wants to add an introduction. Write 1–2 sentences that could go in the blank to clearly introduce the essay.

Rubric

Points	Criteria
2 points	The response clearly introduces the topic of the essay.
1 point	The response attempts to introduce the topic but has lapses in clarity, focus, or purpose.
0 points	The response fails to clearly introduce the topic of the essay.

Sample Responses

Score	Sample Response	Rationale
2 Points	Do you ever come to school tired? You probably need more sleep!	This clearly introduces the topic with a relatable question and opinion. It connects directly to students' experiences and sets up the essay's focus on the importance of sleep.
2 Points	Sleep is very important, especially for children.	This statement introduces the topic directly and establishes the central idea that sleep matters. It is clear, focused, and well-suited to lead into the essay's supporting details.
1 Point	There are many reasons why kids should get more sleep.	This attempts to introduce the essay but lacks clarity. It suggests reasons will follow but doesn't state the broader topic of sleep as clearly or directly as a strong introduction would.
1 Point	I'd like to tell you about the importance of sleep.	This introduces the topic but is conversational and less focused. It signals the subject but doesn't directly establish why sleep matters for kids, limiting its effectiveness as an introduction.
0 Points	Sleeping is good.	This response is too vague and oversimplified. It fails to clearly introduce the essay's topic or establish focus on why sleep is important for children.
0 Points	You can do better in school when you get enough sleep.	This provides a detail that belongs in the body, not the introduction. It does not serve as a clear, general introduction to the essay's overall topic of sleep.

Sample 4.5

LA.4.W.5.d — On-Track:

Provide a concluding statement or section related to the information or explanation(s).

*Item***Read the draft of Ava's essay about kite flying.**

Kite flying is an easy, fun activity if you follow these instructions.

First, choose a kite that you will enjoy. It doesn't have to be fancy. A simple, diamond-shaped kite is a good choice. Choose one that has colors and a design that you like.

After you have your kite, pick a good place to fly it. A wide-open area is best so the kite doesn't get caught in a tree or on a power line. An empty field is a perfect spot.

Finally, with an adult, decide on a good time to fly your kite. Windy days are best, but running with the kite helps lift it if there is not enough wind. _____

Ava wants to add a conclusion. Write 1–2 sentences that could go in the blank to make a strong conclusion for the essay.

Rubric

Points	Criteria
2 points	The response effectively concludes the essay and follows from the information presented.
1 point	The response attempts to conclude the essay but has lapses in clarity, focus, or purpose.
0 points	The response fails to effectively conclude the essay and follow from the information presented.

Sample Responses

Score	Sample Response	Rationale
2 Points	Following these steps will help you have a kite that soars.	This conclusion connects directly to the directions in the essay, restating the purpose clearly. It provides closure by emphasizing the outcome of following the steps.
2 Points	All you need is the right kite, the right place, and the right time. Now you can fly a kite!	This effectively summarizes the essay's main points and concludes with encouragement. It ties directly to the instructions while offering closure in a lively, purposeful way.
1 Point	It will be fun and easy if you follow these steps.	This attempts to conclude the essay but is vague. It restates the general idea but doesn't strongly tie back to the specific details or instructions from the essay.
1 Point	A kite can be big or small, colorful or plain. Enjoy flying your kite.	This provides closure but shifts focus to kite description rather than the process explained in the essay. It partially connects but lacks the clarity and focus of a strong conclusion.
0 Points	Kite flying is fun.	This is too general and doesn't build on or connect to the detailed steps presented in the essay. It fails to provide a purposeful conclusion.
0 Points	Run fast to get your kite off the ground. Watch out for trees.	This introduces new instructions instead of concluding. It reads like another step rather than a final statement, so it doesn't effectively close the essay.

Grade 7 Constructed Response Sample Items

Sample 7.1

LA.7.W.3.e — On-Track:

Provide a conclusion that is clearly related to and appropriately reflects on the literary experiences or events.

Item

Read the paragraphs from the draft of Ginny's story.

Chloe had begun to think of Hoot as her very own pet owl, although she knew in her heart that he was wild and would someday fly away from her backyard and never return. When that day came, though, Chloe felt pretty miserable. She had gotten used to going outside to check the owl box each evening. If Hoot was there and looking out, she would smile and say a few words to him, and if not, she would wait patiently until he stuck his head out of the box's opening.

Sometimes, she wondered why Hoot decided to leave on that particular day and where he was now. She also wondered if he might someday come back for a visit. Something told her he would, so she kept checking for him every day. She also kept her ears open at night to listen for owl calls in her backyard.

After almost a year of watching and listening with no sign of Hoot, Chloe realized he had found another place to live. _____

Ginny needs to add a conclusion. Write 1–2 sentences that could go in the blank to make a strong ending for the story.

Rubric

Points	Criteria
2 points	Response provides a conclusion that is clearly related to and appropriately reflects the events of the story.
1 point	Response provides a conclusion that is somewhat related to and reflective of the events of the story.
0 points	Response fails to provide a conclusion that is related to and reflective of the events of the story.

Sample Responses

Score	Sample Response	Rationale
2 Points	Chloe still missed Hoot, but she was glad for the time they had together.	This conclusion directly reflects Chloe's feelings about Hoot and the story's events. It acknowledges loss and the value of the experience, creating an appropriate and thoughtful closure to the story.
2 Points	Even though Hoot was gone, Chloe never forgot. She knew the backyard wouldn't feel the same without him.	This conclusion ties back to the central relationship and emotions. It reflects Chloe's sense of change and loss, while connecting meaningfully to the story's main events.
1 Point	Owls prefer to live in the wild, so Hoot probably did, too.	This response is somewhat connected but neglects the story's emotional depth. It explains Hoot's departure logically but does not fully capture Chloe's reflections or provide strong closure.
1 Point	Chloe looked at the empty owl house and chuckled. She wondered what else she would do now that Hoot was gone.	This connects to the events but weakly reflects Chloe's emotions. It provides an ending but minimizes the story's central theme of connection and loss.
0 Points	Chloe eventually got tired of waiting and stopped checking the owl house. She soon forgot all about Hoot.	This contradicts the story's development, ignoring Chloe's ongoing feelings. It does not reflect on the events appropriately and undermines the emotional core of the story.
0 Points	One evening, she noticed that a different owl had moved into the owl box.	This introduces a new event instead of reflecting on Hoot. It shifts focus away from an emotional resolution, so it doesn't serve as a proper conclusion.

Sample 7.2

LA.7.W.4.a — Developing:

Develop a structure to sequence ideas and introduce a claim where appropriate.*Item***Read the paragraph from Micah's draft of a science essay.**

_____ The ocean is thousands of feet deep. However, when people think about the ocean, most think about its surface. Beach lovers imagine blue water sparkling in the sun and waves crashing on the shore. Few people think much about the bottom of the ocean. The ocean floor is very different from its surface. Scientists have explored only about 25% of the deep ocean, as it is difficult to reach. There is much to learn from deep sea study. Deep ocean exploration could help us better understand the entire planet, so it should be something that scientists study more often

Micah needs to state his claim in an introduction. Write a sentence that could go in the blank to introduce Micah's claim.

Rubric

Points	Criteria
2 points	Response introduces the claim of the paragraph.
1 point	Response attempts to introduce the claim of the paragraph but has lapses in clarity, focus, or purpose.
0 points	Response fails to introduce the claim of the paragraph.

Sample Responses

Score	Sample Response	Rationale
2 Points	Scientists should study the ocean floor more.	This directly states the claim and introduces the essay's central argument. It simply but clearly sets up the purpose of the paragraph and connects to the details that follow.
2 Points	There is still a lot to be learned from studying the deep ocean.	This introduces the claim by highlighting the need for further study. It clearly establishes focus and prepares readers for the supporting evidence that follows.
1 Point	Do you know that scientists study the ocean to learn about the planet?	This attempts to introduce the topic but is unfocused as a claim. It asks a question rather than clearly stating the argument that scientists should study the deep ocean more.
1 Point	There is much more to the ocean than just the surface.	This relates to the topic but doesn't clearly present the claim. It emphasizes a fact rather than introducing the essay's main argument about deep ocean study.
0 Points	The ocean is huge.	This is too general and does not introduce a claim. It provides information loosely related to the topic but fails to connect to the argument that the deep ocean should be studied more.
0 Points	Not many people realize how deep the ocean is.	This observation is loosely related but doesn't state a claim. It introduces a fact without establishing the argument about the importance of studying the deep ocean.

Sample 7.3

LA.7.W.4.d — On-Track:

Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the argument(s) presented.

*Item***Luci is writing an argumentative essay. Read these paragraphs from the end of her draft.**

One way to make vegetables more appealing is to try a new way of preparing them. Blending veggies into a smoothie or cooking them with another favorite food, like cheese, can make them more enjoyable. Roasting carrots or turnips makes a delicious, sweet dish that can almost be eaten for dessert. Some people enjoy making and eating dried beet chips!

People might also learn to love vegetables by starting with ones that have a mild flavor. Peas, sweet potatoes, and corn all make good “beginner” vegetables. An appreciation for more bitter vegetables, such as kale and broccoli, may develop over time.

Someone who has tried vegetables before and didn’t like them should be willing to try again. The taste for foods changes over time. If someone tries a vegetable they haven’t had in a while, they might find that they like it.

Luci needs to add a conclusion. Write 1–2 sentences that could go in the blank to make an effective conclusion for the essay.

Rubric

Points	Criteria
2 points	Response provides an effective conclusion that follows from and supports the argument presented.
1 point	Response attempts to provide a conclusion but has lapses in clarity, focus, or purpose.
0 points	Response fails to provide an effective conclusion to the essay.

Sample Responses

Score	Sample Response	Rationale
2 Points	There are many ways to learn to like vegetables. Trying new recipes or giving veggies another chance can help people enjoy them more.	This conclusion summarizes the essay's key points and supports the argument. It reinforces the claim with specific strategies and provides clear closure.
2 Points	With effort and a little creativity, almost everyone can learn to love vegetables.	This restates the essay's argument in a concise, encouraging way. It follows logically from the examples and supports the main claim, offering a strong final point.
1 Point	Those are all ways to learn to like vegetables.	This attempts closure but is weakly stated. It references the essay's ideas but doesn't fully support the argument, limiting clarity and effectiveness.
1 Point	People might not eat vegetables because of their taste. Maybe they should give them a chance.	This connects loosely to the essay but shifts focus toward restating a problem rather than supporting the claim. It attempts closure but lacks clarity and purpose.
0 Points	Vegetables are an important part of a healthy diet. They provide essential vitamins and minerals.	This shifts the focus to health information instead of concluding the argument. It introduces new facts rather than supporting the essay's claim, so it does not function as a conclusion.
0 Points	Another way to learn to love vegetables is to try eating them with vegetable dip or ranch dressing.	This adds a new idea instead of closing the essay. It extends the body by suggesting another method, failing to provide closure or reinforce the existing argument.

Sample 7.4

LA.7.W.5.a — On-Track:

Introduce a topic clearly and provide a specific focus, grouping information logically and including text features, illustrations, and/or multimedia elements.

Item

Read these paragraphs from Peyton's essay.

Up, up, and away! Hot air balloons are a unique way to soar in the sky. _____

The Envelope

The envelope is the colorful body of the hot air balloon that's filled with air. Made of light and strong fabrics, it is about 55 feet wide and 60–80 feet tall. The bottom section has a special coating so it can tolerate high heat from the burner.

The Basket

The hot air balloon's basket has a metal frame, wicker sides, and a solid wood bottom. Wicker is the woven plant material used to make the baskets. Hot air balloon baskets can hold 2–30 people.

The Burner

Hot air balloons float because warm air rises. The burner runs on propane, a clean-burning gas, to heat the air in the envelope. When the air inside is warmer than the surrounding air, the balloon lifts.

Flying

To get started, the basket and burner are attached to the envelope, which is spread out on the ground. A fan is used to fill the envelope with air. When the envelope is almost fully inflated, the burner is turned on.

Peyton needs to finish the introduction. Write 1–2 sentences that could go in the blank to introduce the specific focus of the essay.

Rubric

Points	Criteria
2 points	Response clearly and effectively introduces the specific focus of the essay.
1 point	Response attempts to introduce the specific focus of the essay but has lapses in clarity, focus, or purpose.
0 points	Response fails to clearly and effectively introduce the specific focus of the essay.

Sample Responses

Score	Sample Response	Rationale
2 Points	Balloons have three main parts—an envelope, a basket, and a burner—which allow them to fly.	This response clearly introduces the essay's focus by naming the three parts and connecting them to flight. It sets up the structure for the following sections logically and effectively.
2 Points	Hot air balloons have three main parts. These work with warm air to allow the balloon to rise.	This introduction identifies the essay's focus—the three parts of a balloon—and links them to their function. It is clear and specific and sets up the organization that follows.
1 Point	These are the parts of a hot air balloon.	This attempts to introduce the topic but is vague. It signals the essay is about balloon parts but, unlike the 2-point examples, does not specify which parts or how they connect to flight.
1 Point	Hot air balloons have many different parts.	This provides a general statement but lacks focus. It is imprecise, as it suggests a broad idea instead of narrowing to the three specific parts discussed in the essay.
0 Points	Let me tell you about hot air balloons.	This is conversational and does not introduce the essay's specific focus. It signals a general topic but lacks clarity or purpose in setting up the structure about the balloon's three parts.
0 Points	The envelope is one part of a hot air balloon.	This jumps into a body detail instead of providing an introduction. It fails to clearly introduce the essay's overall focus on the three main parts and their role in flight.

Sample 7.5

LA.7.W.5.d — Advanced:

Provide an effective and well-developed concluding statement or section that follows from the information or explanation(s).

Item

Read these paragraphs from the end of Cam's essay about learning to play the trumpet.

In addition to the vibration of the lips, playing a trumpet correctly depends on the movement of the fingers. Your fingers press the three valves in various combinations. These finger placements, combined with the speed of the air flow, will allow you to produce the full scale of notes. You'll use a chart to help you learn to make the notes at first.

Once you have learned the basics of holding the trumpet, producing sound, and moving your fingers, you still need to work on building strong lip muscles and improving your breath control. Good trumpet players know how to change the buzz of their lips to alter the sounds they create.

Learning to play the trumpet is a challenge. _____

Cam needs to add a conclusion. Write 1–2 sentences that could go in the blank to provide a strong conclusion for the essay.

Rubric

Points	Criteria
2 points	The response provides an effective concluding statement that follows from the information presented.
1 point	The response attempts to provide a concluding statement but has lapses in clarity, focus, or purpose.
0 points	The response fails to provide an effective concluding statement that follows from the information in the text.

Sample Responses

Score	Sample Response	Rationale
2 Points	Playing the trumpet takes time, but the results are worth it. The more you practice, the better you will get.	This conclusion follows logically from the essay, reinforces the theme of practice, and provides closure by encouraging persistence. It provides a meaningful message to the target audience.
2 Points	Holding the trumpet correctly and using correct breath control will help you practice the right way. Keep working at it, and soon you'll be making great music.	This statement effectively concludes the essay by connecting effort to results. It reflects the essay's message about practice while ending on a positive, encouraging note.
1 Point	Learning to move your fingers correctly and change the vibration of your lips takes time.	This attempts a conclusion but repeats some details rather than summarizing or extending the essay's main idea. It lacks a strong sense of closure.
1 Point	The trumpet is fun to play. If you practice, maybe you'll get good at it.	This offers a conclusion but is general and weakly phrased. It connects loosely to practice but doesn't fully capture the essay's emphasis on challenge and persistence.
0 Points	Trumpets are not the only instrument that is hard to play. The flute and trombone also use the mouth muscles and are hard to learn.	This shifts to new information about other instruments, straying from the essay's focus. It doesn't provide closure for the topic of learning trumpet.
0 Points	Practice makes perfect. If you are good at something, it means you have practiced.	This attempted conclusion is too general and disconnected. It mentions practice but does not tie specifically to playing trumpet or follow directly from the information in the essay.

Grade 8 Constructed Response Sample Items

Sample 8.1

LA.8.W.3.e — Advanced:

Provide an effective and well-developed conclusion that is clearly related to and reflects upon what is experienced, observed, or left unresolved over the course of the piece.

Item

Read these paragraphs from the end of Zhara's story.

Simone tried everything she could think of, but the stain just wouldn't come out. She knew she had to tell her sister. Leah would be upset that Simone had borrowed her shirt without permission and gotten a big purple stain on it.

Holding the shirt behind her back, Simone went to her sister's room to confess. "Okay, don't be mad. I did something, and I'm very sorry," she began. Then she held the shirt up for her sister to see. Leah's eyes got big, but she took a deep breath.

"You're not supposed to borrow my things without asking," Leah said very slowly, trying to stay calm.

"I know, but you weren't home to ask," Simone replied. She knew that wasn't a good excuse, but she said it anyway.

Zhara needs to add a conclusion. Write 2–3 sentences that would provide a strong ending to the story and show what lesson Simone learned.

Rubric

Points	Criteria
2 points	The response effectively concludes the story in a logical way and clearly reflects on the lesson learned by the main character.
1 point	The response concludes the story with minor lapses in content or focus or does not effectively reflect on the lesson learned by the main character.
0 points	The response does not conclude the story in a logical way or does not reflect on the lesson learned by the main character.

Sample Responses

Score	Sample Response	Rationale
2 Points	After seeing how sorry her sister seemed, Leah said, "Well, that's okay because that shirt doesn't fit me anymore." Simone felt better, but she knew she would have to make it up to Leah in the future.	This provides closure and reflection. It resolves the conflict about the shirt with forgiveness and shows Simone's understanding of responsibility, effectively establishing a lesson learned.
2 Points	Leah replied, "If I took your stuff when you weren't home, you'd be mad." Simone thought about that and realized her sister was right. "I'm sorry."	This conclusion is logical and reflective. Simone recognizes her sister's perspective, admits fault, and apologizes, clearly showing growth and lesson learned. The resolution here is substantially different than in the above example, but both meet the specifics of the ALD.
1 Point	Seeing Simone's tears, Leah said, "Well, that's okay because that shirt doesn't fit me anymore anyway." Simone smiled.	This concludes the story but lacks deeper reflection. It ends logically, yet Simone's growth and lesson are only implied rather than clearly developed.
1 Point	Simone really felt guilty for ruining the shirt. She never borrowed her sister's clothes again.	This provides some closure and shows a lesson, but it is abrupt and underdeveloped. The jump to "never again" is somewhat disconnected from the narrative, limiting its effectiveness.
0 Points	"That shirt didn't even fit you anyway," replied Simone. She stomped out and slammed the door.	This ending contradicts the story's direction. Instead of reflecting or resolving, it escalates the conflict and ignores the lesson, failing to provide meaningful closure.
0 Points	Leah replied, "Next time you better wait and ask." Simone rolled her eyes.	This conclusion is dismissive and fails to reflect a lesson. Simone doesn't reflect or accept responsibility, so it doesn't logically or effectively close the story.

Sample 8.2

LA.8.W.4.b — Advanced:

Effectively introduce claim(s), acknowledge and distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or supporting claims, and develop a sophisticated structure in which ideas are grouped logically.

Item

Read these paragraphs from the beginning of Olivia's argumentative essay.

Although many townspeople think a new playground should be built in the empty lot behind the town office buildings, many local teenagers disagree. _____

Sure, young kids enjoy playgrounds, and their parents like having a place for their kids to play, but older kids and teenagers are interested in more advanced activities. We like the challenge and excitement of skateboarding, scootering, and BMX. We need a good place to do those things in our town. Skating on sidewalks can be difficult and dangerous.

Skateparks are safe, fenced spaces with smooth surfaces great for roller sports. Studies have shown that there are multiple health and social benefits to skateparks. They are places where teens can be active and creative, build confidence, and develop physical skills. They are also community spaces where kids and teens can meet and hang out safely.

Write a strong thesis statement that could go in the blank to clearly state the claim and introduce the ideas in the essay. Write 1–2 sentences.

Rubric

Points	Criteria
2 points	Response skillfully introduces the claim and major ideas of the essay.
1 point	Response attempts to introduce the main argument and major ideas of the essay but has minor lapses in clarity, focus, or purpose.
0 points	Response fails to skillfully introduce the claim and major ideas of the essay.

Sample Responses

Score	Sample Response	Rationale
2 Points	We think a skatepark would be a better use of the space. There are already playgrounds for young kids in our town, but no skateparks.	These sentences skillfully introduce the central claim and acknowledge the alternate claim about playgrounds. They clearly set up the essay's focus and structure.
2 Points	Our city has enough playgrounds--we need a skatepark. Skateparks are safe places that offer health and social benefits for teens.	This response clearly states the claim and previews supporting reasons. It effectively organizes the argument and prepares the reader for the essay's development.
1 Point	Skateparks can help the teens and young adults in town by providing a place for them.	This introduces the topic but lacks clarity and focus. It introduces "young adults," a term not used elsewhere in the essay. Further, it fails to preview the major ideas, limiting its effectiveness as a thesis.
1 Point	Playgrounds are fun for small children but not really for teens. Teens need a skatepark.	This acknowledges the claim about playgrounds and introduces a broad argument, but it's simple and underdeveloped. It addresses a general issue more than the specific issue of the town.
0 Points	Skateparks are fun for teens but not for small kids.	This states an opinion but doesn't establish a clear claim. It misses the focus and fails to introduce supporting ideas or distinguish the essay's argument.
0 Points	Playgrounds can be fun but not really for teens.	This addresses part of the alternate claim but does not present a clear argument or preview ideas. It's too general to function as an effective thesis statement.

Sample 8.3

LA.8.W.4.f — On-Track:

Provide a conclusion that follows from and supports the argument(s) presented.

*Item***Read these paragraphs from the end of Natasha's essay about having a positive attitude.**

Understanding that a positive attitude can help you feel better is the first step to changing your outlook. But how do you shift to a mindset that lets you truly believe that everything will be all right? The good news is that positivity can be learned. Even people who expect everything to go wrong can change their thinking.

Experts recommend several methods. One is positive self-talk. That means telling yourself that good things will happen. For example, a soccer player may tell herself, "If I focus on practicing, I will play well during Saturday's game." Another way is to notice the good things that happen during each day and write them in a journal each evening. Even small things count! Did you share a joke with a friend? Or maybe you read an interesting graphic novel. Write those things down.

Of course, positive thinking won't stop negative events from occurring. _____

Natasha needs to add a conclusion. Write 1–2 sentences that would make an effective conclusion that supports Natasha's argument.

Rubric

Points	Criteria
2 points	Response provides an effective conclusion to the essay that supports the information presented.
1 point	Response attempts to provide a conclusion to the essay but has lapses in clarity, focus, or purpose.
0 points	Response fails to provide an effective conclusion to the essay that supports the information presented.

Sample Responses

Score	Sample Response	Rationale
2 Points	However, with a focus on the positive, you will start to see the good things, too. Remember to look on the bright side of things.	This provides closure that reinforces the essay's main argument about adopting positivity. It follows logically from the information presented and leaves the reader with an encouraging takeaway.
2 Points	Nevertheless, with a positive attitude, you can feel better about whatever comes your way.	This conclusion effectively supports the essay's central claim that positivity improves one's outlook. It connects directly to the argument and offers a concise, motivating final statement.
1 Point	But you should keep believing and noticing the good things.	This attempts a conclusion and relates to the essay's ideas but lacks development. It touches on positivity without fully reinforcing the argument or providing strong closure.
1 Point	Remember, be positive as often as you can. Also, write it all down in your journal.	This connects to the essay but is uneven in focus. It repeats earlier advice instead of summarizing the argument or offering a broader concluding insight.
0 Points	Bad things happen, even to good people.	This contradicts the essay's main argument by focusing on negativity. It repeats a common adage and doesn't follow from or support the essay's ideas, failing to provide an effective conclusion.
0 Points	Sometimes you'll have bad days, but then you'll also have good days!	While related to emotions, this response lacks focus and fails to reinforce the essay's argument about intentional positive thinking. It's general and does not provide meaningful closure.

Sample 8.4

LA.8.W.5.a — On-Track:

Introduce a topic clearly and provide a specific focus; organize ideas, concepts, and information into broader categories or sections including text features, illustrations, and/or multimedia elements.

Item

Read these paragraphs from the beginning of Hannah's essay about the color blue.

There is more to the color blue than meets the eye. _____

Some people say that the color blue can have an effect on a person's mood. They believe that resting your eyes on something blue will calm your mind. Maybe that's because blue is the color of both sky and sea, which can be calming. Based on this idea, many people paint their bedroom blue for a restful effect. A person designing a website for a spa might use a blue background for the homepage to suggest that the spa is relaxing.

Blue might be popular in homes and businesses, but it happens to be very rare in plants and animals. True blue pigment almost never occurs in nature. To produce blue, plant and animal cells either mix other colors or bend light in special ways. Blue jays have a beautiful blue color, but their feathers have no blue pigment.

Hannah needs to finish the introduction. Write 1–2 sentences that could go in the blank to introduce and provide the focus of the essay.

Rubric

Points	Criteria
2 points	Response clearly and effectively introduces the topic and focus of the essay.
1 point	Response attempts to introduce the topic and focus of the essay but has lapses in clarity, focus, or purpose.
0 points	Response fails to clearly and effectively introduce the topic and focus of the essay.

Sample Responses

Score	Sample Response	Rationale
2 Points	Blue is an interesting color. It may affect your mood, but it is rare in nature.	This clearly introduces the topic and specific focus by previewing both key ideas—the emotional impact of blue and its rarity in nature—effectively setting up the essay's organization.
2 Points	It is both common and rare at the same time.	This statement effectively introduces the essay's focus by highlighting the central contrast explored in the text—blue's frequent presence in human life and its rarity in nature. It meets the minimal requirements of the ALD.
1 Point	Blue is popular in homes and businesses, but it is rare in plants and animals.	This attempts to establish focus but mirrors information from the body paragraphs rather than introducing it. It previews content without a clear, overarching introduction.
1 Point	Do you know why many people paint their bedroom blue, or that a blue jay isn't really blue?	This engages the reader but lacks clarity and structure. It hints at the essay's focus with a question but doesn't clearly introduce or organize the main ideas.
0 Points	Of all the colors of the rainbow, blue is my favorite.	This personal statement fails to introduce the essay's informational focus. It is opinion-based and unrelated to the text's explanatory purpose.
0 Points	Read on to find out why.	This directive doesn't introduce the topic or focus. It serves as a transition rather than a clear introduction to the essay's content or structure.

Sample 8.5

LA.8.W.5.d — On-Track:

Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from the information or explanation(s).

*Item***Read the paragraphs from the end of Richelle's essay about the East Side Gallery.**

As a separator between East Berlin and West Berlin for many years, the Berlin Wall represented mistrust and division. However, it was transformed into something very different—an outdoor art gallery—in the early 1990s.

The transformation began in 1989, when part of the Berlin Wall was torn down. Once this border was opened, people celebrated their new freedom, and artists started painting on the Wall. Eventually, some artists asked the government if they could turn the Wall into “the largest gallery in the world.” The project was approved, and artists from around the world were invited to paint murals.

The East Side Gallery officially opened on September 28, 1990. In 1991, it was added to Berlin’s register of protected monuments, so it is here to stay. _____

Richelle wants to add a conclusion. Write 1–2 sentences that would make a strong conclusion for the essay.

Rubric

Points	Criteria
2 points	Response provides a logical conclusion to the essay that follows from the information presented.
1 point	Response attempts to provide a conclusion to the essay but has lapses in clarity, focus, or purpose.
0 points	Response fails to provide a logical conclusion to the article that follows from the information presented.

Sample Responses

Score	Sample Response	Rationale
2 Points	It's an amazing example of how something negative can be transformed into something beautiful.	This provides a clear, logical conclusion that reflects the essay's theme. It effectively summarizes the transformation of the Berlin Wall and offers a thoughtful final insight.
2 Points	The gallery is a reminder that people can be free and express themselves. It shows how art can change something negative into a celebration.	This conclusion logically follows from the essay, reinforcing its themes of freedom and transformation through art. It provides effective closure to the essay.
1 Point	If you're ever in Berlin, you should visit the East Side Gallery.	This response attempts closure but shifts to giving advice rather than reflecting on the essay's information. It's loosely related but lacks focus on the gallery's historical or symbolic significance.
1 Point	This outdoor art gallery is an important attraction in Berlin.	This provides a factual ending but is overly general. It restates information without reflecting on the essay's deeper ideas of unity and transformation.
0 Points	It is a good place to see art.	This conclusion is too simple and disconnected from the essay's focus. It adds no insight or logical reflection on the wall's transformation or meaning.
0 Points	The Berlin Wall represented mistrust and division, but it was transformed into an outdoor art gallery.	This sentence merely repeats earlier information instead of concluding. It fails to add new insight or provide closure that follows from the essay's explanation.