

# Writing Effective Prompts: A Guide for Teachers



**MI**  **MEASUREMENT  
INCORPORATED**  
EXCELLENCE IN ASSESSMENT™  
[www.measurementinc.com](http://www.measurementinc.com)

EXCELLENCE IN ASSESSMENT

## WRITING EFFECTIVE PROMPTS: A GUIDE FOR TEACHERS

Utah Compose features a rich set of engaging and grade-appropriate writing prompts that have been proven effective over thousands of administrations. But developing and administering your own prompts can be an adventure of its own, and your enthusiasm may rub off on your students, bringing a sense of vitality and adventure to their writing processes. Writing about a recent hometown event or an issue of local interest can motivate students to produce their best work.

We've created this simple guide to help you get started. By following a few basic principles, you can create stimulating prompts and ensure that student responses will receive valid and reliable automated scores.

### Communicate the purpose of the writing assignment.

Students need a clear writing purpose to provide direction for developing and organizing their ideas. The Utah Compose system is trained to score essays that explain or inform, persuade, or convey experiences. The table below further describes these purposes in categories known as genres (also referred to as modes of discourse). To ensure reliable scoring, your prompt should reflect one of these categories (keeping in mind that genres may overlap).

Purpose	<i>To Explain</i>	<i>To Persuade</i>	<i>To Convey Experience</i>
Genre	<b>Expository; Explanatory</b>	<b>Argumentative</b>	<b>Narrative</b>
Goal	To expand the reader's understanding of or appreciation for the topic	To change or reinforce the reader's point of view or stimulate the reader to take action	To tell a story or describe a personal experience (real or imagined)
Example	Your school is creating a "time capsule" that will be opened 50 years from now. Your class has been invited to make predictions about how the school will change between now and then.  Write an essay for future students explaining how your school may change. Use specific examples.	A student committee has been formed to select a new mascot for your school. Three choices are being considered: the Tigers, the Dolphins, or the Rockets. Write a letter to the committee expressing your support for one of the choices (or propose another). Defend your choice. Be sure to include reasons why yours is the best choice.	"Oh no, I can't find my book bag." "Hey, I just found a quarter."  Have you ever lost anything that you wish you hadn't? Have you ever found something unexpectedly? Write a story about losing or finding something. Be sure to describe the circumstances and describe how you felt.

Review the pre-loaded Utah Compose prompts for inspiration and prompt length. To help you get started, try building your own Utah Compose prompts using the following stems and statements. Depending on the scenario you create, some stems can be used for multiple communicative purposes.

### **To Explain**

- Describe your favorite...
- Explain all the things you need to...
- Explain why you chose...
- Explain why \_\_\_\_ is important to you.
- Compare and contrast...
- Write about an example of...
- Describe the steps involved in...
- Explain \_\_\_\_\_ and how you use it effectively.

### **To Persuade**

- Propose a plan for...
- Explain why you think...
- Explain why you agree or disagree with the statement...
- Convince your peers to get involved with your school's \_\_\_\_\_.
- Convince your principal that a school-wide plan to \_\_\_\_ has or does not have merit.
- Consider how others might view...

### **To Convey Experience**

- Imagine...
- Describe what happened when...
- Tell about a time....
- Create a story about...
- Tell about an adventure in...
- Write about an important childhood memory when....
- Convey the experience of...
- What would have happened if the writer had...?

#### **For Best Results:**

##### **Give students time to develop their responses.**

Plan on giving students at least 30–60 minutes (or the equivalent of a class period) on the assignment. Utah Compose scoring is calibrated to this time frame. Responses that are too short (because they are composed in, say, 15 minutes) may be interpreted as underdeveloped when compared to responses composed during an entire class period.

##### **Avoid prompts/questions that have right/wrong answers.**

Utah Compose is not trained to evaluate responses as correct or incorrect with regard to content.

#### **Establish a scenario or context for the prompt.**

Each example in the genre table provides a bit of detail about the circumstances surrounding the writing task. Here's where your creativity and knowledge of your students can really shine.

Provide enough relevant detail to stimulate their thinking. Consider real-world, grade-appropriate topics and give them as much local flavor as you can. While topics should be substantive matters for their consideration, try to avoid issues that are highly controversial socially or politically, or emotionally charged, or that require students to share overly personal information.

**Identify the audience.**

Effective writers always keep the reader in mind when composing their work. Always state or imply the intended audience in your writing prompts. This will help your students frame their responses appropriately. The table below outlines a hierarchy of audiences that are common to various levels of skill development.

Elementary School		
Middle School		
High School		
<b>School Audiences</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Principal</li> <li>• Teachers</li> <li>• Classmates</li> </ul>	<b>School Audiences</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student council</li> </ul>	<b>School Audiences</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School board</li> </ul>
<b>Publications</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School newspaper or newsletter</li> <li>• Authors</li> <li>• Contests</li> </ul>	<b>Publications</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local newspaper</li> <li>• Magazines</li> </ul>	<b>Publications</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Websites (school-related)</li> </ul>
<b>Familial or Peer Audiences</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peers</li> <li>• Parents, siblings, and other family</li> </ul>	<b>Business and Workplace</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Company public information representatives</li> <li>• Vendors of school products (e.g., textbooks, food)</li> </ul>	<b>Business and Workplace</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CEOs</li> <li>• Prospective employers</li> <li>• Non-profits</li> </ul>
	<b>Government</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mayor</li> <li>• Governor/Legislators</li> <li>• President</li> </ul>	<b>Higher Education</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Admission counselors or committees</li> <li>• College officials</li> <li>• Scholars</li> </ul>

**Choose an appropriate form.**

Writing can take many forms (e.g., letters, essays, blogs, diary entries, poems), and sometimes a form’s conventions can add to or detract from the writing’s effectiveness. Although the PEG scoring engine can be trained to evaluate virtually any kind of prose writing, the scoring models used by PEG employ a “universal” essay form derived from those most commonly used in statewide, high-stakes writing assessments. These scoring models generalize exceptionally well and accurately reflect the quality of the student’s expression. However, if you develop a prompt that will generate unconventional forms (i.e., not full prose paragraphs) then it should be scored by hand.



**Enter your prompt into Utah Compose!**

1. Go to [www.utahcompose.com](http://www.utahcompose.com) and log in.
2. Select “Prompts” tab.
3. Select “Add” button.
4. Enter your Prompt “Title” and “Description” then select “Save.”
5. Assign the prompt to your students and have them submit their essays for instant scoring.

Citation: National Assessment Governing Board (2010). “Writing Framework for the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress.” Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. <http://www.nagb.org/publications/frameworks/writing-2011.pdf>