READING AND WRITING CENTER
Westfield State University

Preparation Materials for the
Massachusetts Test for Educator Licensure:
Communication and Literacy Skills Test

WRITING SUBTEST

Written Composition
Notes

Revised: November, 2012
Reading and Writing Center, Westfield State University

Including information adapted from:
   The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, ’09
   Pearson Education ’09
   Jennifer Cook, The University of Massachusetts Amherst,
       School of Education and Division of Continuing Education ’02, ’01, ’00
Written Composition

In this section of the Writing subtest, candidates are asked to write a multi-paragraph composition of approximately **300 to 600 words** on an assigned topic provided in the test. The response is scored on the extent to which the argument is effectively communicated to the specified audience for the stated purpose, and it is assessed on the ability to express, organize, and support opinions and ideas. The response is not assessed on the position taken. Compositions should conform to standard English conventions (i.e., be free of grammatical errors), should be written legibly, and should be the candidate’s original work. [See the Scoring Rubric for the composition on page 4.]

**PLANNING Strategies for Writing Your Essay**

1) Candidates should read the essay question prompt very carefully, identifying the arguments presented for both sides of the debate. (Usually there will be 2 reasons given for both sides.)

2) The task is to write a multi-paragraph, persuasive essay. (See page 3 of this packet for format suggestions.)

3) Candidates should make a **T-chart graphic organizer** on the small white board provided and label one side “PRO” for “proponents” and one side “OPP” for “opponents.” (A template for the T-chart is provided on page 2 of this packet). Numbers 1-3 should be written down each side of the T-chart where the two arguments on each side of the issue are jotted down (from the arguments provided as part of the essay question prompt). A space can be left to fill in the third argument.

4) After filling in reasons 1 and 2 on both sides of the T-chart, candidates should examine the reasons carefully to determine in which column stronger support exists. Candidates should determine which reasons will allow them to write the response in complete paragraphs. That would be the side of the topic to be argued. Despite how candidates may feel about the issue, candidates should **argue the position** for which they are able to give the **BEST reasons and evidence**.

5) Now candidates should try to come up with the third and final argument to use to defend the position. If candidates are at a loss to come up with a third reason, they can try using the **antithesis** of one of the reasons given for the other side of the argument.

6) It is possible to write the essay without ever having to come up with new reasons.
   - Try to use the reasons the test provides, but only use the reasons if they are understood and if an effective argument can be made with them.
   - The reasons should NOT be strictly opinions or personal anecdotes; they should be based in fact or truth. The side chosen will not affect the score; how well candidates are able to defend the position will determine the score.

7) When the third argument has been listed, the T-chart has been filled in completely.

8) **Plan what support** will be used to illustrate the reasons. These could be hypothetical situations, logic, news reports, personal experience (and experiences of family members), etc. Candidates will want to make notes of these before writing.

9) The next step is to write (below the T-chart) the lead sentence (as discussed on page 3), the thesis statement (the sentence that tells the reader **exactly** what will be argued in the essay), the (three or more) topic sentences (to be used as the first sentence in each body paragraph), and the topic sentence for the conclusion.

10) Once these (six) key sentences have been written on the white board, candidates should proceed with composing the essay on the computer.

11) Now, while still practicing for the MTEL, candidates should compare their written responses with the sample strong and weak responses and analyses at the back of this packet. (-some portions adapted from J. Cook, 1/01)
COMPOSITION EXERCISE

Read the passages below about grouping students according to academic ability; then follow the instructions for writing your composition.

**Ability Grouping Is an Appropriate Educational Practice**
Classroom instruction is most effective when it takes into account the different ability levels of students. Schools that don't use ability grouping often fail to provide appropriate challenges for gifted students or to identify the special needs of students who may not be able to keep pace with their peers. Grouping by academic ability also enables teachers to deliver instruction effectively in a way that best meets the needs of all students.

**Ability Grouping Is Not an Appropriate Educational Practice**
The potential costs of ability grouping clearly outweigh its benefits. Schools do not have a reliable way of determining individual potential, and many students are placed in groups that expect less of them than they can actually achieve. Moreover, ability grouping frequently attaches negative labels to students, undermining their self-esteem and creating self-fulfilling prophecies about their future academic performance.

Your purpose is to write a persuasive composition, to be read by a classroom instructor, in which you take a position on whether or not students should be grouped according to their academic ability. Be sure to defend your position with logical arguments and appropriate examples.

(***The graphic organizer below is simply a model and will not be supplied during the test. Candidates will create their own templates on the dry erase board at the test.***)

**Graphic Organizer T-chart (to write out on white board)**

**Which side are you going to take?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arguments for</th>
<th>Arguments against</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>3.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Organizing Your Introduction**

Lead Sentence:

Thesis statement:

**Organizing Your Body Paragraphs**

Topic Sentence 1:

Topic Sentence 2:

Topic Sentence 3:

**Conclusion** (Restatement of the thesis, in different words):

Topic Sentence:
Writing the Essay: The Multi-Paragraph Paper

The multi-paragraph essay includes an opening paragraph (introduction), several support/developmental paragraphs (body), and a closing paragraph (conclusion).

Beginning (Introduction)
The opening paragraph should accomplish three things:

- The lead-in statement should gain the reader’s attention and interest in the subject and provide relevant background.
- There are several ways to draw the reader’s attention to the subject. Six effective techniques are listed here.
  - Open with a series of questions about the topic.
  - Provide an interesting story or anecdote about the subject.
  - Present a startling or unusual fact or figure.
  - Quote a well-known person or literary work.
  - Define an important, subject-related term.
  - Use an opposing view and then rebut (straw man approach).
- It should present the opposing view to your argument. This can often be done using an “although” sentence that presents the counter-argument and then offers a rebuttal in support of your stand. And it can sometimes also serve as the thesis or lead into the thesis. (Example: “Although opponents of recycling claim that too much money is being spent on a program that is not making a difference [counter-argument], evidence overwhelmingly proves that even the smallest efforts of recycling are having a positive impact on our environment” [rebuttal].) (Candidates should look up information that reviews counter-argument if needed.)
- It should identify the position or thesis that will be developed in the main part of the essay. This should be put this toward the end of the first paragraph.

Middle (Body)
The developmental paragraphs are at the heart of the essay. They must clearly and logically support the thesis. If, for instance, candidates were going to present information about paper recycling, each developmental paragraph in the essay should discuss a separate important element related to that subject which has been previewed in the introduction.

A few things to remember:

- It’s important that these paragraphs are arranged in the best possible way—chronologically, by order of importance, or by an order of your own making.
- It’s also important that the paragraphs flow smoothly from one to the next. To achieve this flow, candidates should make sure that the first sentence in each new paragraph serves as an effective link to the preceding paragraph. Repetition of key phrases can also provide effective transitions (“One reason I support/oppose…”). Transitions like in addition, on the other hand, and as a result are often used for this purpose. [See page 1 of Summary packet for information on transitions.]
- A new paragraph should be started whenever there is a shift or change in the essay. This change is called a paragraph shift and can take place for any of the four basic reasons:
  1. a change in emphasis or ideas
  2. a change in time
  3. a change in speakers
  4. a change in place or setting

Ending (Conclusion)
The closing or summary paragraph should tie together all of the important points in the essay and make a final interesting point.

- Leave the reader with a clear understanding of the essay topic by restating the thesis in different words.
- Don’t undercut the thesis by saying the other side makes strong points.
- Look to the future or consider another solution (if you oppose a particular approach).

### Performance Characteristics:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appropriateness</th>
<th>The extent to which the candidate addresses the topic and uses language and style appropriate to the given audience, purpose, and occasion.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mechanical Conventions</td>
<td>The extent to which words are spelled correctly and the candidate’s writing follows the conventions of punctuation and capitalization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usage</td>
<td>The extent to which the candidate’s writing shows care and precision in word choice and is free of usage errors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence structure</td>
<td>The effectiveness of the sentence structure and the extent to which the sentences are free of structural errors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus and Unity</td>
<td>The clarity with which the candidate states and maintains focus on the main idea or point of view.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>The clarity of the writing and the logical sequence of the candidate’s ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development</td>
<td>The extent to which the candidate provides statements of appropriate depth, specificity, and/or accuracy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Scoring Scale:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score point</th>
<th>Score Point Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **4** | A well-formed written response.  
- The candidate addresses the assignment fully and uses appropriate language and style.  
- The candidate shows mastery of mechanical conventions (e.g., spelling, punctuation, and capitalization).  
- Usage and choice of words are careful and precise.  
- Sentence structure is effective and free of errors.  
- The candidate clearly states a main idea and/or point of view, and maintains focus and unity throughout the response.  
- The candidate exhibits control in the organization of ideas.  
- The candidate develops the response fully by providing ample statements of appropriate depth, specificity, and accuracy. |
| **3** | An adequately formed written response.  
- The candidate addresses the assignment adequately and generally uses appropriate language and/or style.  
- There may be some errors in the use of mechanical conventions (e.g., spelling, punctuation, and capitalization).  
- Minor errors in usage and word choice are evident.  
- Sentence structure is adequate, although minor errors may be present.  
- The main idea and/or point of view of the response is generally clear, and focus and unity are generally maintained.  
- The organization of ideas may be ambiguous, incomplete, or partially ineffective.  
- The candidate provides a sufficient quantity of statements of appropriate length, specificity, and accuracy to adequately develop the response. |
| **2** | A partially formed written response.  
- The candidate partially addresses the assignment and may use inappropriate language and/or style.  
- The candidate makes frequent errors in the use of mechanical conventions (e.g., spelling, punctuation, and capitalization).  
- Sentence structure is poor, with noticeable and distracting errors.  
- The main idea and/or point of view is inconsistent and/or the focus and unity of the discussion are not sustained.  
- The candidate may make an effort to organize and sequence ideas, but organization is largely unclear.  
- The response includes very few statements that contribute effectively to the development of the response. |
| **1** | An inadequately formed written response.  
- The candidate attempts to address the assignment, but language and style are generally inappropriate for the given audience, purpose, and/or occasion.  
- The candidate makes serious and numerous errors in the use of mechanical conventions (e.g., spelling, punctuation, and capitalization).  
- Imprecision in usage and word choice interferes with meaning.  
- Sentence structure is ineffective, and few sentences are free of errors.  
- The main idea and/or point of view of the response is not identified.  
- Any organization that is present fails to present an effective sequence of ideas.  
- The candidate fails to include statements that contribute effectively to the development of the response. |
| **U** | The response is unrelated to the assigned topic, illegible, primarily in a language other than English, not of sufficient length to score, or merely a repetition of the assignment. |
| **B** | There is no response to the assignment. |
Ability grouping should not be allowed for the school systems. This will make the school system a segregation within itself and should not be allowed. First let's take an example of an individual that does not speak English. In the school system the student has to participate in ESL classes and is usually not allowed in the classrooms where there is classes taking place that are in English. Therefore the student has to be taken out of the classroom experience which will hinder their learning experience. The teacher might have a bit of difficulty with the student but, it will be beneficial for the student to stay for those type of classrooms where he will pick up English better and understand overtime. Because if this is done the enrich vocabulary.

When you look at this through a specific classroom, let's say English, on the high school level. After the class write their essay you have them peer-edit each other's work. You could pair someone who excels in writing to help someone who could use the help. If you keep the students who are at a lower level editing each other's work; they may not catch the mistakes because to them it looks okay, that's how they write. Grouping should not be allowed in the school systems because it hinders one's ability to participate and by removing a child from the classroom, that child might not know what is going on and might think that they did something wrong and feel really guilty about the process of getting moved to a different classroom. It is not a good idea to do this process.
This is an example of a weak response because it is characterized by the following:

**Appropriateness:** The response takes a position on the assigned issue ("Ability grouping should not be allowed for the school systems"), and partially addresses the assignment by arguing that ESL students should not be excluded from classes taught in English. However, the example of ESL students is a very narrow one, and arguably not a good example of ability grouping. The level of the language and style is inappropriate to the task of demonstrating writing competence through a formal essay to be read by a classroom instructor.

**Mechanical Conventions:** The response has many errors of punctuation, spelling, and capitalization. A comma is wrongly placed after a conjunction ("difficulty with the student but, it will be . . ."), a semicolon is wrongly placed after a dependent clause ("If you keep the students . . . editing each others work; they"), and a colon is inserted where none is required ("Grouping should not be allowed in the school systems because: . . ."). Misspelled words include "classrom," "individuale," "thier," "vocabularry," and "participate." "English" is uncapitalized throughout the response.

**Usage:** Errors in usage are numerous and confusing, beginning with the opening sentence, "allowed for," rather than "allowed in." Similarly, "stay for" is written rather than "stay in." There is subject-verb disagreement ("there is classes," "the class write"). Statements such as "This will make the school system a segregation within itself" and "Because if this is done the enrich vocabularry" are unclear. "Over time" is run together into a single word, "overtime," which has a different and irrelevant meaning. Apostrophes are omitted where required ("lets," "each others") and inserted where not required ("excel's"). A student is referred to variously as "he," "they," and "one."

**Sentence Structure:** There are sentence fragments (the final sentence of paragraph one, and the first sentence of paragraph two). "By removing a child from the classroom, that child might not know" is a dangling participle.

**Focus and Unity:** The position taken is clear, but the points that follow are unclearly stated and so are hard to relate to the thesis. In the first paragraph, the ESL student is not being allowed to take classes that are conducted in English: "Therefore the student has to be take out of the classroom" to "the teacher might have a bit of a difficaty . . . but, it will be beneficial for the student to stay for those type of classroms. . . ." The intended meaning must be that if the student were to be allowed to remain in the English-speaking classroom, he/she would benefit, despite the difficulty posed to the teacher. However, this understanding requires the reader's inference. In the second paragraph the response suddenly addresses "you," who seems to be an English teacher practicing peer editing in a mixed-ability classroom. The argument being made, that lower-level students are not able to help one another through peer editing, has no clear relationship to the previous points about ESL students. The final point, that a child being removed from one classroom to another might not understand what is happening and might feel guilty, is also unrelated to previous points.

**Organization:** Organization is largely unclear. The opening paragraph moves directly from position statement to a supporting argument. It is hard to follow the logic that moves from "therefore the student has to be take out of the classroom" to "the teacher might have a bit of a difficaty . . . but, it will be beneficial for the student to stay for those type of classroms. . . ." The intended meaning must be that if the student were to be allowed to remain in the English-speaking classroom, he/she would benefit, despite the difficulty posed to the teacher. However, this understanding requires the reader's inference. In the second paragraph the response suddenly addresses "you," who seems to be an English teacher practicing peer editing in a mixed-ability classroom. The argument being made, that lower-level students are not able to help one another through peer editing, has no clear relationship to the previous points about ESL students. The final point, that a child being removed from one classroom to another might not understand what is happening and might feel guilty, is also unrelated to previous points.

**Development:** Very few statements contribute effectively to the development of the response. The argument about ESL students is not supported by any explanation of what is wrong with the instruction offered to them in specialized classes. Arguments about ability grouping are supported very sketchily: it "will hinder thier learning experience," and "it will be beneficial for the student to stay." The one example given of the ability grouped classroom is about peer editing, which is unlikely to be a teaching strategy in a low-level English class. The argument that students might feel guilty is not supported by any explanations or examples.
Everyone always says students should learn to their fullest potential. How can student be pushed when they aren't challenged by school or their needs for learning aren't being met. Its important for students be identified of their learning type and be placed into the correct group in school so they can benefit from their educational experience. People may not think it is fair or right for people to judge individuals learning styles. They have got this idea wrong. Everyone isn't the same type of learner and has certain strengths and weakness they should care about. They also shouldn't be embarrassed or even care what other think. They should just focus on their education and not worried on being grouped. They have no right to infer judgements on other that may not have a same style.

Even in schools today kids are grouped for their learning styles. People aren't being mean or libelling them in a bad way, the school is just trying to help out the student to feeling they are confident about their learning. Schools can have many ways of determining students needs of the classroom. They can be provided with tests which can involve hands on, visual and oral; a little on everything so teachers can determine on testing the students needs for any extra help they had need to place them in a group.

Finally, I think it would be a good idea and very beneficial not only to that one student but to the entire class. Everyone can gain from this system. In our world today as things become more advanced; kids learning to their fullest potential would benefit of our society and themselves
ANALYSIS FOR SECOND WEAK RESPONSE TO COMPOSITION EXERCISE

This is an example of a weak response because it is characterized by the following:

**Appropriateness:** The response takes a position on the assigned issue ("It's important for students be identified of their learning type and be placed into the correct group in school"), although it is not clear that "learning type" is the same thing as "ability." The response partially addresses the assignment by arguing that placing students in groups according to their learning styles will be beneficial to them. However, very little is said about this except that this placement should not be embarrassing. The level of development of the response is not appropriate for demonstrating writing competence through a formal essay to be read by a classroom instructor.

**Mechanical Conventions:** The response has few spelling errors ("adavanced") and no errors of capitalization. It has several punctuation errors: a period used to end a question ("How can student be pushed when . . . their needs . . . aren't being met," and two semicolons that should be commas, as the semicolons do not separate two independent clauses.

**Usage:** Errors in usage create confusion, especially in paragraph two, where "they" often lacks a clear antecedent, seeming to move from people who do not think it is fair to judge, to other people who do judge, to students being judged, back to the people who are judging. Other usage errors are distracting ("Its important for students be identified of their learning type"). "Infer" is used to mean "pass" or "make." "Libelling" is used to mean "labeling." There are errors of subject-verb agreement ("how can student be," "care what other think").

**Sentence Structure:** There are problems with sentence structure: a comma splice ("People aren't being mean . . . , the school is just trying . . ."), an absent verb ("They should just focus on their education and not worried on being grouped.")

**Focus and Unity:** A position in favor of grouping students according to learning styles is maintained throughout, but the argument lacks clarity in large measure because of the vague and unclear use of pronouns. "They" often lacks a clear antecedent, beyond the example already given. For instance, in paragraph three, "Schools can have many ways of determining students needs of the classroom. They can be provided with tests. . . ." It is unclear whether "they" refers to schools or to students.

**Organization:** Organization is marked by appropriate paragraphing. However, the argument is not clearly made. The opening paragraph refers to developing students' full potential and the benefits of grouping. But the next paragraph is about how no stigma should be attached to grouping, and the third paragraph asserts that students are already grouped and that tests can determine group placement. The final paragraph asserts that grouping would benefit the "entire class," but moves quickly to a different point, unclearly stated, about the need for grouping in an advanced society.

**Development:** The response is not effectively developed. Assertions are made but not supported. The term "learning styles" is not defined, and no examples of different styles are offered. No support is given for the claim that grouping students according to learning styles is educationally beneficial. It is not clear why there would be any stigma attached to different learning styles, or who attaches that stigma to them. The testing that would sort students by learning style ("hands on, visual and oral") is vague and unclear.
Grouping students by ability seems like a great idea on the surface. It would simplify a teacher's job by creating a classroom of students who are capable of learning at approximately the same level. This could be to the benefit of students because they will not have to wait through instruction that is inappropriate for them. However, tracking would also introduce many problems. Schools would have to devote resources to the administration of tracking itself. Tracking would be likely to benefit some students at the expense of others. The diversity and understanding that we should promote for our society would be undermined, and students assigned to lower groups might internalize a negative view of themselves. There are benefits to dividing classes by ability, but overall the problems would overshadow them.

Ability tracking does not mean placing students in particular tracks and leaving them there forever. As students grow and learn and encounter new subjects, their abilities may rise and fall. Teachers would have to sort students into different tracks on a regular basis. This would take a lot of time and is difficult to do fairly. Because a placement might not be fair, it would need to be reviewed at least every year so that any incorrect placements could be changed. Making these assessments would create a whole new category of work for teachers and administrators, while in today's classrooms teachers are already pressed for time with standardized tests and over-stuffed curriculums.

The students most likely to benefit from ability tracking would be the ones who need help the least, the highly gifted and motivated. Although tracking might help to provide appropriate challenges for gifted students, this might come at the cost of other students. Teachers, taxpayers, and parents are likely to be more willing to put limited resources into a group that will clearly benefit from them: the gifted group. But this would not be fair and would widen the achievement gap even further. Education for all is a fundamental right, and public funds should be allocated equally among students. Homogeneous grouping is additionally detrimental to students' social development, even the gifted ones, because in the real world individuals of varying ability are forced to work and live together. To place the top students in a hothouse of other top students in no way prepares them for the real world. Meanwhile the other students are not inspired and challenged by their presence.

Ability tracking would also require more resources because if classes are taking place at different skill levels they will probably require different materials, perhaps entirely different textbooks or equipment. Schools today struggle to maintain adequate and up-to-date materials as it is. They do not need additional financial burdens.

An even more pressing issue than the resources for ability grouping is the psychological component. Teachers would need to decide whether to place students in higher or lower tracks, but a student's ability is not a black and white matter. Students may excel in some subjects, not in others, or even perform at different levels within a subject. The diversity of qualities on which to assess students would make the semantics of grouping a nightmare. Teachers and parents could potentially be at odds over a placement, which could create headaches for the school. The reaction of the child is also important to consider. Instead of being seen as a valued member of the school community, each student would now be judged by his supposed "ability." This assessment might be unfair and hurtful. Students labelled as slow or weak may lose motivation or hope, and teachers may unfairly stereotype them.

Ultimately, though ability tracking might seem to offer benefits, it is too much of a minefield. The potential for unfairness, high costs and stigma are too great. Ability grouping does not appropriately promote the diversity and equality we value as Americans. This is not to say that all students perform at the same level, but that their differences need to be respected within a shared classroom, where all have an equal opportunity to excel.
ANALYSIS FOR FIRST STRONG RESPONSE TO COMPOSITION EXERCISE

This is an example of a strong response because it is characterized by the following:

**Appropriateness:** The response addresses the topic fully and uses language and style that are appropriate to the occasion and audience—writing a formal essay to be read by an audience of classroom instructors.

**Mechanical Conventions:** The response demonstrates a mastery of spelling, capitalization, and punctuation, including the colon, the plural possessive apostrophe, and the correct enclosure of punctuation within quotation marks.

**Usage:** The response employs a precise and effective vocabulary, including terms such as "internalize," "overshadow," "over-stuffed curriculums," "homogeneous grouping," "semantics," "stereotype," "stigma," and "minefield." Sentences are grammatical, and pronouns have clear antecedents.

**Sentence Structure:** Sentence structure is error free and effectively varied in form and rhythm. For instance, in the fourth paragraph, a very long sentence is followed by a shorter one, and then a still shorter one whose point then carries more power.

**Focus and Unity:** The response remains clearly focused on its thesis throughout: ability grouping would create more problems than it would solve. Arguments are forecast in the opening paragraph that are then developed in the body paragraphs and reinforced by a matching conclusion.

**Organization:** The response is very well organized. The opening paragraph acknowledges the potential benefits of ability tracking but argues that these benefits would be outweighed by specific problems. The second paragraph focuses on the administrative burdens of ability tracking; the third paragraph cites the inequities that would harm lower-level students and the limitations that would harm high-level ones. The fourth paragraph points out the resource costs that would be involved; the fifth deals with the difficulties of placement. The final paragraph presents a conclusion that both summarizes the arguments and goes beyond them to say that ability grouping is at odds with American ideals.

**Development:** Each of the arguments the response makes is well supported. The workload that ability tracking would place on teachers and administrators is described; the problems of the homogeneous classrooms (overfunding of higher-level classes at the expense of lower-level ones, the loss of the realistic experience of diversity, the loss of inspiration by other students) are anticipated; the psychological problems for teachers trying to place students, and for parents and students reacting to placements, as well as the potential for harmful error, are powerfully cited.
The education of children is a challenging endeavor. Each child has his or her own particular set of needs, strengths, and interests. In the classroom setting, instructing twenty-five students or more all at once in a large group is almost certain to leave many of those needs unaddressed. Thus, ability grouping is an appropriate practice to respect and support each child and his or her potential.

Having a class made up of such a large number of students of varying abilities presents a very difficult situation for the teacher. Teaching in a way that will challenge the gifted student will leave many children behind. However, teaching to the bottom skill level leaves those who have already mastered the material frustrated and bored. Likewise, maintaining a middle course alienates those at both the upper and lower ends of the spectrum. Although those who oppose ability grouping envision a classroom in which the quicker students serve as resources for the slower ones, in practice this does not really work well. The stronger students have a right to the role of student, and not to be used as teacher aides; and any instruction by them may not be well received by their peers. Further, although they may understand the material well, that does not mean they are equipped to teach it. Students who need extra help deserve the professionalism, experience and attention of the classroom teacher.

The only logical solution is to institute some form of ability group. In this scenario, those with special needs will have their needs met. The students who struggle with classwork can work at their own level without embarrassment and without having to feel they are making others impatiently wait. Those for whom the classwork is too easy will be able to forge ahead without having to feel odd or be resented. Both types of student will be relieved of the burden of not fitting in.

It is important to understand that ability grouping not only helps students to focus academically, but also helps them socially. Students who are having difficulty realize they are not alone in their struggles. Gifted students, likewise, realize they are not alone in their interests, and can benefit immensely from interactions with other students like themselves.

Opponents of ability grouping will argue that it will result in labelling and be detrimental to the student. Other opponents will argue that having a mixed class allows students to benefit from their interactions with each other. However, these concerns can be addressed. Ability grouping does not have to trumpet itself with labels at all: it can be done subtly, without announcement. Children may remain unaware of it. Of course, it is not appropriate for all activities, and for those activities the entire class can be mingled together freely. In addition, these groups need not be static.

Nobody is good at everything. It is possible to define ability groupings in a very fluid way, such that the groups are short-lived and reflect interest level and skill level on a particular topic rather than more globally. Thus a child might be in a high level grouping in a unit about the Civil War, but a low level grouping in math. This arrangement avoids the entire problem of labelling, and also avoids the pitfalls of a one-time entrance assessment in which many students may be placed in the incorrect grouping. Also, interests and skill sets change over time, and a fluid ability group could accommodate that.

Thus, while not a panacea, ability grouping is an important and useful tool. It can allow students all to have the experience of feeling normal, unjudged, and moving forward in a positive, gratifying way. It can allow the teacher to modify lessons to be optimally useful and interesting to the students involved. Rather than categorize students in a demeaning way, it allows each student a more personalized kind of instruction. When implemented well, and used in conjunction with periods when the class as a whole interacts, ability groups help meet everyone’s educational needs.
This is an example of a strong response because it is characterized by the following:

**Appropriateness:** The response addresses the topic fully and uses language and style that are appropriate to the occasion and audience—writing a formal essay to be read by an audience of classroom instructors.

**Mechanical Conventions:** The response demonstrates a mastery of spelling, capitalization, and punctuation, including the semicolon, colon, and the hyphen to create compound adjectives.

**Usage:** The response employs a precise and effective vocabulary, including terms such as "alienate," "spectrum," "trumpet itself," "panacea," "demeaning," and "conjunction."

**Sentence Structure:** Sentence structure is error free, varied, and complex. Simple declarative statements are alternated with longer, more complex sentences. Parallel statements build arguments (as in paragraph three: "The students who struggle . . . Those for whom the classwork is too easy . . . Both types of student . . . ").

**Focus and Unity:** The response is clearly focused throughout on its opening position: "ability grouping is an appropriate practice to respect and support each child and his or her potential." Body paragraphs establish that in a heterogeneous classroom, no students are well served, that ability grouping serves students' academic and social needs, and that the concerns of critics can be acknowledged and addressed. The conclusion sums up these arguments, supporting ability grouping modified by periods of whole-class participation, and acknowledging the need to implement grouping skillfully.

**Organization:** The response is very well organized. The opening paragraph clearly presents ability grouping as the best means of supporting all children's educational needs. The second paragraph describes the frustrations of each kind of student in classrooms where there is no tracking, and points out the flaws in the practice of having stronger students act as tutors of weaker ones. The third and fourth paragraphs describe the academic and social benefits to children of being able to work at their own pace and not feel odd. The fifth and sixth paragraphs acknowledge the concerns of critics and offer solutions for them, along with an elucidation of the flexibility of ability tracking. The final paragraph offers a brief summary and conclusion.

**Development:** Each of the arguments the response makes is well supported, chiefly through description, logical argument, and hypothetical examples. Because the interests of both the higher- and lower-level students are equally addressed, the arguments feel balanced and reasonable, a quality that contributes to persuasiveness.