MTLE Objectives for the Basic Skills: Writing

0007 Understand methods for developing an organized, effective, and coherent expression of ideas.
- recognizing effective thesis statements, topic sentences, and supporting details
- recognizing details that distract from the main idea of a paragraph or passage
- recognizing wordiness and ineffective repetition and redundancy
- recognizing unnecessary shifts in point of view (e.g., from first to third person)
- reorganizing sentences or paragraphs to achieve a logical sequence of ideas
- selecting revisions that improve the unity, clarity, and cohesion of a paragraph or passage
- selecting appropriate transitional words or phrases to convey text structure and to help readers understand the sequence of a writer's ideas

0008 Understand and address errors in sentence formation, grammar, and usage.
- identifying and revising errors in sentence formation (e.g., sentence fragments, run-on sentences, lack of parallel structure)
- identifying and revising errors in the standard use of verb forms (e.g., verbs in the wrong tense or form, incorrect shifts in tense or person, lack of subject-verb agreement, wrong or missing verb endings)
- identifying and revising errors in the standard use of pronouns (e.g., vague pronoun references, lack of agreement between pronouns and antecedents, incorrect use of relative pronouns, incorrect shifts in pronoun person and number)
- identifying and revising errors in the standard use of adverbs, adjectives, and modifying phrases (e.g., misplaced or dangling modifiers)
- identifying and revising errors in the standard use of prepositions (e.g., wrong or missing prepositions)
- identifying and revising errors in the standard use of comparatives, superlatives, and possessives
- identifying and revising errors in the standard use of negatives
- identifying and revising imprecise and inappropriate words or phrases or commonly confused words or phrases (e.g., like/as if, anymore/any more, this kind/these kinds, lay/lie)
- identifying and revising errors in the use of homonyms (e.g., accept/except, affect/effect, its/it's, their/there/they're, to/too/two, weather/whether, who's/whose, your/you're)

0009 Understand and address errors in spelling, capitalization, and punctuation.
- identifying and revising common spelling errors
- identifying and revising common errors in standard capitalization
- identifying and revising common errors of punctuation
Demonstrate the ability to prepare a well-organized and focused piece of writing for a given purpose and audience, using standard English conventions.

- taking a position on an issue, proposition, or statement and defending that position
- describing a life experience and evaluating the impact of that experience on the writer's life, ideas, or attitudes
- maintaining a central theme or main idea through the effective use of a thesis statement, topic sentences, and transitions
- developing a well-organized argument using sound reasoning and relevant supporting information, details, or examples
- demonstrating effective paragraph and sentence structure and employing vocabulary appropriate for the audience and purpose of the writing task
- using precise and appropriate words and phrases
- demonstrating command of standard English conventions of grammar and usage
- demonstrating command of standard English conventions of spelling, capitalization, and punctuation
Writing Sample 1

Read the passage below, and then answer the questions that follow. You will notice that the sentences have been numbered.

1. Not long ago, the surprising announcement that Pluto is not the ninth planet in our solar system confounded the wisdom of millions of science books and generations of schoolteachers. 2. Reclassified by the International Astronomical Union as a "dwarf planet," Pluto is not even the largest of the five dwarf planets identified thus far. 3. This development underscores the difficulties scientists face in evaluating data about the outer planets of our solar system. 4. As a result of recent advances in technology, there has been an explosion of new and more detailed information about the universe, and researchers are kept hard at work collecting data and devising theories to explain what they see. One of these hard-working scientists is U.S. astronomer Heidi Hammel. 6. Aided by the Hubble Space Telescope, Dr. Hammel's team made the surprising discovery in 2005 that one of the rings of Uranus is blue. 7. Several planets have been found to have rings, but practically all of them appear to be reddish in hue, suggesting the presence of the element iron. 8. A possible explanation for Uranus's blue ring, says Dr. Hammel, is that the ring is composed of tiny particles too small to contain iron. 9. It may instead be made of minuscule ice particles or some substance similar to the electrically charged particles in the tail of a comet. 10. With more information constantly coming in, she and her colleagues must always be prepared to adapt their theories to the facts. 11. Than again, it may be something else.

1. Which change would make the sequence of ideas in the second paragraph clearer?
A. Reverse the order of Parts 6 and 7.
B. Reverse the order of Parts 7 and 8.
C. Reverse the order of Parts 8 and 9.
D. Reverse the order of Parts 10 and 11.

2. Which change is needed in the passage?
A. Part 7: Change "hue" to "hew."
B. Part 8: Change "too" to "to."
C. Part 10: Change "their" to "there."
D. Part 11: Change "Than" to "Then."

3. Which part contains an error in capitalization?
A. Part 2
B. Part 5
C. Part 6
D. Part 8
Writing Sample 2

Read the passage below; then answer the three questions that follow. Again, you will notice that the sentences have been numbered.

1. Best known for its imaginative poetry, the Romantic Era in English literature also witnessed important developments in the genre of fiction. 2. These changes can be seen in the enormously popular Gothic novels that explored the dark side of human nature and introduced an other-worldliness that inspired early science fiction. 3. Even more significant were the complex crafted novels of Sir Walter Scott. 4. By creating detailed settings and populating them with the full range of Scottish society, from beggars and rustics to landed nobility, Scott took the historical novel well beyond its previous focus on the lives of royalty. 5. In the course of doing so, he redefined the genre of historical fiction.

6. Sir Walter Scott came to this literary world through his fascination with the past, particularly that of his native Scotland. 7. The son of a solicitor, he entered the University of Edinburgh at the age of twelve. 8. Initially applying his energies to narrative verse he completed the first of his more than thirty novels in 1814. 9. The blend of the historical and the marvelous found in this and succeeding works soon made Scott one of the most famous writers of his era. 10. Less notable were the techniques he employed – an omniscient narrator, the use of regional dialect and historical language, the creation of detailed local settings, and sophisticated and realistic characterization. 11. The resulting product not only fascinated readers but also inspired other writers, untold numbers of whom have been following his lead for nearly two centuries now.

4. Which part is least relevant to the main idea of the second paragraph?
   A. Part 6
   B. Part 7
   C. Part 10
   D. Part 11

5. Which change is needed in the passage?
   A. Part 3: Change "complex" to "complexly."
   B. Part 5: Change "historical" to "historic."
   C. Part 10: Change "notable" to "notably."
   D. Part 11: Change "nearly" to "almost."

6. Which change is needed in the passage to correct an error in punctuation?
   A. Part 2: Insert a comma after "nature."
   B. Part 4: Delete the comma after "society."
   C. Part 6: Delete the comma after "past."
   D. Part 8: Insert a comma after "verse."
Writing Sample 3

Read the passage below; then answer the three questions that follow.

1. In 2004, the two major parties spent a combined total of four billion dollars on the presidential campaign.
2. Less than a decade earlier, they spent only half that much. These figures illustrate the emergence of two serious problems.
3. One is the staggering cost of national campaigns, which prevent people of modest means from running for office and condemns those who try to almost certain defeat. The other is the negative impact that such vast amounts of money have on our political system, as much of this money is used to fund the transmission of emotional appeals that degrade the democratic process.
4. It seems only fair that all candidates have the same spending limit, regardless of their financial circumstances.
5. Wealthy individuals should be prohibited from using private funds in excess of prescribed limits.
6. __________, donations from organized groups should be limited to the same amount for each candidate. The result would be fewer highly paid political consultants, less character defamation, and fewer ads designed to bolster a given candidate's public image. __________, citizens might once again see serious treatment of important issues in contests that embody the best traditions of U.S. democracy.

7. Which words or phrases, if inserted in order into the blank lines in Parts 8 and 10 of the second paragraph, would best help the reader understand the sequence of the writer's ideas?
   A. As a result; Meanwhile
   B. For this reason; Consequently
   C. Similarly; Instead
   D. Moreover; On the contrary

8. Which change is needed to correct an error in subject-verb agreement?
   A. Part 4: Change "prevent" to "prevents."
   B. Part 5: Change "have" to "has."
   C. Part 5: Change "degrade" to "degrades."
   D. Part 10: Change "embody" to "embodies."

9. Which underlined word in the passage is spelled incorrectly?
   A. condemns
   B. transmission
   C. perscribed
   D. defamation

10. From time to time all of us take on or are given responsibilities that we may or may not be glad to have. In a written response for educated adults, describe a responsibility that you were given or took on and explain why meeting that responsibility became a rewarding experience or a difficult chore.

11. It has been proposed that all citizens in the United States be required to vote in local, state, and national elections. In an essay to be read by educated adults:
   - discuss why you agree or disagree with this proposal; and
   - defend your position with reasoned arguments and relevant examples.
A few years ago, I went to an agricultural fair, and fell in love with . . . chickens.

They were so beautiful! The Plymouth Barred Rock with its black and white stripes and bright red comb, the Dark Brahma with its feathered legs like mud flaps, the Araucana with its brown and black feathers as elaborate as a leopard's spots! I went home and announced to my family that we just had to have a chicken coop in the back yard.

Given that we live in a residential neighborhood, this was at the time a pretty startling idea. But I talked a lot about fresh eggs and promised to take full responsibility for the coop, the birds, and winning over the neighbors.

I really had no idea how much responsibility this project would be. First I had to go door to door to get written consent from my neighbors in order to get the small animal permit. Then my dad helped me build a coop with a nice pen that contained roosts and nesting boxes for six birds. I lined them with straw and wood shavings, read up on how to care for chickens, and then bought my little flock.

I had imagined just feeding the birds, cleaning up after them, and enjoying a steady diet of fresh eggs. However, there is quite a bit more work than that involved, as it turned out. I had to get up early to care for my chickens before school (and collect eggs). Their water has to be regularly changed, they need grit in their diet as well as vitamins when they're laying, and in the winter the coop has to be insulated and somewhat heated. I had to install an infrared lamp on a timer, and many days I had to shovel myself a path through the snow. There are also potential illnesses to watch out for, and predators to guard against—not only dogs but hawks. When you're caring for animals, there are no days off.

All these chores were a significant responsibility for me at the time. But I took a lot of pride in it: I had a serious, adult piece of work that I absolutely had to do, or the birds would suffer. I could never let that happen. I can honestly say that in spite of all the work, keeping chickens was never a burden, because I was in love, and I still am.

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10: Sample Strong Response:

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Should all Americans be required to vote? Because voting is so central to a democracy, it has been proposed that instead of being a right that citizens may exercise, it should be a duty that citizens are required by law to perform. In some ways this sounds like a reasonable idea: it would make possible a fully representational democracy. Instead of just the highly motivated or the well-organized voters, we would hear from everyone. More people vote in presidential elections than in state and local races, but even on the national level, voter turn-out isn't very high, so maybe voting should be mandatory. It seems like the logical conclusion.

However, I cannot support this proposal, for several reasons. One is that the mere act of voting does not guarantee a well-informed choice. The voters who normally stay home may be the ones who are not aware of the issues. They could be forced to vote, but they couldn't be forced to read up on what they were voting for. Some people simply don't follow politics. They lead very busy lives and don't necessarily sit down to read the newspaper every day. If forced to vote, these people might be very easily swayed by sound bites, robo-calls or advertisements. Or they might vote randomly, as a protest. This kind of voting is probably not what the Founding Fathers had in mind. It would not strengthen democracy, but rather cheapen it.

Also, there are certainly voters whose decision to stay home on Election Day is a kind of vote in itself. These are people who have lost faith in our political system, or who cannot support any of the candidates on the ballot. They may believe that the political process is corrupt and that nothing will ever change. Should they be forced by law to vote for someone they do not truly support? All that would do is disguise the problem. Many people want a multi-party system rather than just Republicans and Democrats. Why should they have to support one of the established parties or else face legal consequences? Not voting does not necessarily mean not caring.

Finally, there is something paradoxical about a required choice. The freedom to vote ceases to be a freedom when it is required by law. Requiring a vote would be profoundly un-American. Dictators often force their countries to vote in staged elections, and claim a ridiculously high percentage of people casting their votes for the incumbent. I believe Saddam Hussein used to announce that close to 100% of Iraqis voted for him. We're not a dictatorship by a large margin, but we step a little closer with this kind of mandatory participation in elections. Whether fired by a cause or apathetic to politics, Americans have always lived free of the government telling them how and when to vote. And that freedom, to care or not to care, is at the root of America's greatness.

Those are the more abstract reasons for disagreeing with a proposal to require that everyone vote, but more practically speaking, what exactly would be the consequences of disobeying this law? Would there be penalties for not voting? Jail time? Fines? How much would it cost to monitor who failed to vote and then prosecute them? Who would be responsible for getting to the polls the hospitalized, the mentally ill, the non-English speakers who may be unable to understand the media, those living in isolated regions? And by how much would we have to raise taxes to pay for all the bureaucracy needed for oversight? Solely from a bottom-line point of view, there is little reason to think the proposal is even realistically possible.

There is no question that a greater level of engagement with the issues facing our communities, states, and country would be a positive thing. Unfortunately, that kind of engagement is not something that can be forced into being by a law. If we want people to regain the sense they once had that the right to vote is precious and that the votes they cast are meaningful, then politicians must work harder to deserve and inspire public support. That is the kind of support that will strengthen our democracy, the kind that can't be mandated from above.