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General Information

The Writing section of the ACT involves more than being able to form sentences, spell words correctly, and put periods in the right places. While evaluators will be looking for these things, too, the main things they seek involve your ability to think, reason, and put thoughts on paper, in a clear and meaningful way.

The test contains **one question**, or prompt and **three reference passages**. You will have **40 minutes** to plan, write, and review an essay that addresses the prompt, using evidence in the reference passages. The three passages are different perspectives on the same topic.

Evaluators will be looking for how well you do these things in your essay:

- **evaluate and analyze** the perspectives
- **state and develop** your perspective
- **explain the relationship** between your perspective and those given in the three passages

It really **doesn't matter what your perspective is**, just how well you defend it in your writing.

The desired essay skills are divided here into the **four domains** in which your writing will be scored. Your final Writing **score will be between 2 and 12**.

- **Ideas and Analysis**
- **Development and Support**
- **Organization**
- **Language Use and Conventions**

Within each domain, the evaluators will decide to what degree you accomplish several tasks. The better you perform, the more points you will receive.

For example, one of the tasks in the “Ideas and Analysis” domain is to “engage” with the perspectives you are given. The language in the scoring guidelines goes from a high of “critically engages with” through “productively engages with,” “engages with,” “responds to,” and “weakly responds to.” The lowest descriptor of performance on this task is “fails to respond to.” Your performance on this task and several others will combine to form your score

So, in this case, if you perform at the highest level on “engaging” and perform at that same high level on the other three tasks in the domain, you will score 6 for the “Ideas and Analysis” domain. You will get one score from each of two evaluators for each domain. The two scores

will be averaged to form your score on that domain, which will be between 2 and 12. This domain score will be one of your four scores for writing. **Your final Writing score will be the rounded average of your four *domain* scores.**

Try some **practice essays** and see if you can incorporate all of these skills in your writing. You can begin by writing without a time limit, but you'll want to gradually work toward planning, writing, and reviewing an essay of this type within a 40-minute window.

We'd like for you to know exactly what to expect and how you can prepare to do your best. Here, we list the desired tasks in each domain and tell you what they mean in terms of your performance. For every standard listed, you'll earn maximum points from evaluators of your ACT essay for doing it thoroughly, fewer points for "sort of" doing it, and *very* few points if you mostly don't do it, at all. So, strive for the highest level of performance on each task!

Domain 1: Ideas and Analysis

This domain tests your thinking and analysis skills regarding the three perspectives you are given. Evaluators want to see how deeply you delve into those perspectives to see things that may not be stated but are just implied. You need to be **exact** and **thorough** in order to score well in this domain.

Engagement with the Perspectives

This is done by **citing specific claims** made by the authors as you present your views. Instead of randomly making statements, build *your* argument using things the authors said in *their* arguments. This doesn't mean you necessarily agree with them, but actively use the author's points to create yours.

Nuance and Precision

Be specific in your writing, rather than making general statements. Again, delve deeply into specific points, whether you are agreeing with them or pointing out fallacies. This is about saying *exactly* what you mean, using **precisely appropriate vocabulary**.

Context in Analysis

You need to establish a context for your argument. This is done by sort of **setting the stage** for your comments. To do this, be sure to present "in exactly what circumstance" the arguments of the authors would be valid, invalid, etc.

Deep Examination

In the author's work, look for **evidence of underlying reasons** he/she feels that way about the issue. Address any complexities you find that you think the author may not be considering.

This requires examining the author’s possible motive for writing the piece in the first place. Furthermore, discuss how you think the **author’s experiences and/or values** contribute to his/her opinion.

Domain 2: Development and Support

This domain concerns how well you **form your own perspective** and the kind of **support you provide** for it in your essay. Evaluators want to see how well you can take the perspectives of others and use them to support your own or use your perspective to refute the ones of others. You’ll need to dig for statements in the given perspectives and use them specifically in your own argument.

Development

In your essay, you cannot just make blanket statements and move on. Plan to present each of your arguments, **one at a time**, supporting each with evidence from the text and your viewpoint. Keep in mind that evidence from the text could include author statements that you believe are invalid or faulty. Just be sure to **back up your claims** with your own evidence statements.

Clarity of Reasoning

As you write, analyze what you are proposing in an “if-then” manner. *If* what you say is true, does it necessarily follow that something else you say will be valid? Are you sure of the connection and its validity, in various circumstances and under various conditions? In other words, could a reader of your argument see the connection easily?

Qualifications and Complications

Instead of just presenting each point in one context, be sure to **mention things that could make your argument invalid**. These include conditions and circumstances, perhaps not mentioned by the author. Don’t be afraid to list one or two conditions under which your argument would *not* work. This is evidence of your thinking and reasoning skills.

Domain 3: Organization

Organization is important during both the **planning and writing** of your essay. During the short (5-minute) planning session you allow yourself, try to sketch out your main points and put them in a reasonable order. Think about your approach to the essay and what you want to accomplish. Then, as you write, keep the details in mind: *How* are you going to present a convincing, well-thought-out argument? What strategies can you use to achieve your overall purpose? Add these details where appropriate.

Strategy

A good author has a strategy in mind when writing. You have been given the purpose for this essay: to present your view on three essays written by others, so that part is set. But *how* are you going to go about it? Essay readers will be looking for this strategy when evaluating your work.

Controlling Purpose

Be sure that everything you write in your essay speaks to your argument. Be careful to **stick with the task** and not be tempted by a related subject. If it doesn't bolster your argument in some way, leave it out. But search thoughtfully for things that do apply to your purpose.

Logical Sequence

Sequence in writing is part of strategy. How will you structure your piece to achieve the desired result? You should present your strongest argument point first, or build to a climax by slowly going from least impressive point to the most definitive one. You should allude to all of them in the introduction, or at least mention that there are "several" or "many" reasons for the position you take.

Transitions

Part of writing a convincing argument is being able to move from one point to another in a smooth, seemingly uncontrived manner. A writer does this by making some sort of **reasonable connection between paragraphs**. Don't just start every paragraph as if the previous one did not exist. The need for smooth transitions could affect the sequence you choose, as well. Some things tend to be more easily related or *eased into* with words.

Domain 4: Language Use

The final area in which the essay readers will evaluate your work concerns the actual words you use and how you use them. It's not about how many "million-dollar" words you can write, but how adept you are at **using the appropriate word** for each purpose.

Words to Enhance

Just sticking a long or complicated-sounding word in a sentence is not necessarily a positive thing. Every word you use should further the impact of your argument. If it doesn't, choose another word.

Word Choice

Besides furthering your argument, your choice of words should always do one more thing: make the argument absolutely clear to the reader. Use words that cannot easily be

misunderstood and say *exactly* what you mean. A tip: If you find yourself stressing over a word (thinking you can find a better one), draw a light circle around that word and come back to it during your review. Sometimes the perfect word will come to you a few minutes later as you reread. This is also a good way to keep your thoughts moving and not get sidetracked from your overall purpose.

Style and Register

Your ACT test essay should *not* be an example of how you would argue with your friends in a casual setting. It should be a **formal, academic essay**, using proper English and avoiding the more casual aspects of the language, such as contractions, pop culture expressions, and slang. Write as if you were speaking to a professor you did not know and trying to make a good impression.

Grammar, Usage, and Mechanics

While one or two errors along these lines will not affect your score, many errors will impact it. Be sure you know the grammar, usage, and punctuation rules, and that you check for errors in them as you review. Prior to testing, it's not a bad idea to review things that give many people trouble, such as confusing words (accept/except) and use of a semicolon (;). There are many online sites containing quick practice on these things.

Tips and Tricks

- Any writing task is easier if you have spent time **reading the writing of others**. When you read pieces written by good writers, you learn how *they* go about creating a masterful argument. Be sure to look for examples of the tasks mentioned in the domains as you read and think about how you can incorporate them into your own writing.
 - **Practice making a writing plan**. Even if you don't finish a complete essay each time, practice taking a prompt and planning an essay addressing that prompt. Limit your planning time to 5 minutes or less, simply sketching it out on scrap paper. This is about the time limit you'll need to set for planning during the ACT test essay.
 - In addition to practicing the entire essay process, **practice reviewing** your own work. Find some of those old essays from school to use for a new purpose! Again, limit yourself to 5 minutes for this, in preparation for the test's actual time limit. On test day, no one will tell you to save 5 minutes at the end of the allotted time, to review, but you should do this. Practice making quick work of the review process. You won't have time to make major changes, but catching a mistake here and there could help boost your score.
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