



CUNY Assessment Test in Writing (CATW)

Faculty Handbook

Office of Institutional Research and Assessment
Office of Academic Affairs
The City University of New York

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What is the CUNY Assessment Test in Writing?

The CUNY Assessment Test in Writing (CATW) is a standardized writing assessment instrument designed to elicit direct writing samples from entering students for purposes of placement into freshman composition courses, ESL, and developmental courses. In addition, the CATW is used to determine exit from developmental writing courses and readiness for college-level writing and discipline content courses.

The test reflects national best practices in writing assessment that require students to write in response to a reading passage, and to demonstrate competency in five specific domains: critical response to the text, development of ideas, organization of the response, sentence construction and word choice, and grammar/mechanics. Moreover, the format of the CATW demonstrates alignment with skills taught in the university's developmental and composition curricula, and in 100-level discipline courses, in that it assesses a student's ability to do the following:

- read, understand, and respond to a passage of 300-350 words
- identify key ideas within the reading passage
- write a brief summary of the key ideas in the reading
- demonstrate basic critical thinking
- identify a key idea in the reading passage and present a clearly written response to that idea
- write an essay that is well organized and demonstrates a progression of ideas
- support ideas with relevant personal experience, readings, schoolwork, and/or other sources of information
- demonstrate competence in sentence construction, sentence variety, and word choice
- demonstrate correct usage, grammar, and mechanics

The goal of the CATW analytic rubric is to reflect and assess reading, critical thinking and writing skills in a manner consistent with the curricular goals of developmental writing courses, and to accurately and appropriately assess student readiness for introductory level college courses. Both faculty and students will also see the exam as aligned with the instructional goals of developmental and ESL writing courses, and with the skills needed for success in general education courses.

Format of the CUNY Assessment Test in Writing

The CATW consists of two components: a reading passage of 300-350 words and a series of writing directions intended to guide students in preparing their written responses. It should be noted that students have 90 minutes to complete the test, and they may use a non-electronic dictionary.

The following is a sample test:

Assignment

Begin by reading the passage below.

Hype

Advertisements are the most prevalent and toxic of the mental pollutants. From the moment your alarm sounds in the morning to the wee hours of late-night TV, commercial pollution floods your brain at the rate of about three thousand marketing messages per day. Every day an estimated 12 billion display ads, 3 million radio commercials, and more than 200,000 TV commercials are dumped into North America's collective unconscious. The increase in commercial advertising has happened so steadily and relentlessly that we haven't quite woken up to the absurdity of it all. No longer are ads confined to the usual places: buses, billboards, stadiums. Anywhere your eyes can possibly come to rest is now a place that, in corporate America's view, can and ought to be filled with a logo or product message.

You fill your car with gas, and there's an ad on the nozzle. You wait for your bank machine to spit out money and an ad scrolls by in the little window. You drive through the countryside and the view of the wheat fields is broken at intervals by enormous billboards. Your kids watch Pepsi and Snickers ads in the classroom. A company called VideoCarte installs interactive screens on supermarket carts so that you can see ads while you shop. (A company executive calls the little monitors "the most powerful micromarketing medium available today.") There is nowhere to run. No one is exempt and no one will be spared. In the silent moments of my life, I often used to hear Beethoven's Ninth Symphony play in my head. Now I hear that kid singing the Oscar Meyer wiener song.

Excerpted from Kalle Lasn. "Hype," Signs of Life in the USA: Readings on Popular Culture for Writers, 4th ed. (Sonia Maasik & Jack Solomon, eds.) Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003. 217-220.

Writing Directions

Read the passage above and write an essay responding to the ideas it presents. In your essay, be sure to summarize the passage in your own words, stating the author's most important ideas. Develop your essay by identifying one idea in the passage that you feel is especially significant, and explain its significance. Support your claims with evidence or examples drawn from what you have read, learned in school, and/or personally experienced.

Remember to review your essay and make any changes or corrections that are needed to help your reader follow your thinking. You will have 90 minutes to complete your essay.

The CATW Analytic Rubric: Scoring Criteria

The CATW uses an analytic rubric to evaluate student writing samples, and scores are assigned in five separate domains. Each test is scored independently by two faculty raters and both raters assign scores in each of the five domains.

The Five Scoring Domains

1. “Critical Response to the Writing Task and the Text”: This domain emphasizes the student’s ability to do all parts of the writing task and to demonstrate understanding of the main ideas in the reading text. Using critical thinking, the student must integrate his/her own ideas and experiences in responding to the main ideas in the text.
2. “Development of the Writer’s Ideas”: In this domain the student is evaluated on the ability to develop ideas (for example, the use of summary, narrative or other means of elaboration) that support clarity of expression. The student’s response should strike a balance between broad assertions and specific details and examples. In addition to these details there must be specific references to the text throughout the response.
3. “Structure of the Response”: This domain evaluates the student’s ability to organize ideas into a cohesive essay that supports a central focus, or thesis. Ideas are evaluated for evidence of logical progression and the use of transitions to convey relationships between ideas.
4. “Language Use: Sentences and Word Choice”: This domain evaluates the degree to which the student demonstrates sentence control and variety in sentence structure. The student’s ability to use language to facilitate clarity of expression is also evaluated by this domain.
5. “Language Use: Grammar, Usage, and Mechanics”: This domain evaluates the student’s ability to employ the conventions of standard American English language use in terms of grammar and mechanics, so that meaning is clear.

CATW Analytic Scoring Rubric

	Critical Response to the Writing Task and the Text	Development of the Writer's Ideas	Structure of the Response	Language Use: Sentences and Word Choice	Language Use: Grammar, Usage, and Mechanics
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A thoughtful and skillful response to the task effectively integrates a critical discussion of ideas in the text with relevant elements of the writer's reading and experience. • The discussion demonstrates a thorough understanding of the main ideas and the complexity of ideas in the text. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ideas are fully developed, and approaches to development (e.g., summarizing, evaluating, narrating) are used skillfully to support and convey the writer's ideas throughout the response. • Reasons and specific details and examples from the text and from the writer's reading and experience are used effectively to develop ideas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization demonstrates a well-designed progression of ideas that supports the writer's central focus and the clarity of ideas throughout the response. • Sophisticated, effective use of transitions conveys relationships among ideas throughout the response. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sentences are consistently well controlled, with effective variety in structure. • Word choice is sophisticated, precise, and effectively conveys the complexity of the writer's ideas throughout the response. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Though there may be a few errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics, strong command of language is apparent, and meaning is clear throughout the response.
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The response effectively integrates a critical discussion of ideas in the text with relevant elements of the writer's reading and experience. • The discussion demonstrates a good understanding of the main ideas and the complexity of ideas in the text. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ideas are well developed, and approaches to development (e.g., summarizing, evaluating, narrating) are usually used skillfully to support and convey the writer's ideas. • Reasons and specific details and examples from the text and from the writer's reading and experience are usually used effectively to develop ideas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization generally demonstrates a clear plan with some progression of ideas that supports the writer's central focus and the clarity of the writer's ideas. • Transitions clearly convey relationships among ideas throughout the response. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sentences are usually well controlled, and there is some effective variety in structure. • Word choice is usually specific and usually effective in conveying the writer's ideas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Though there may be a few errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics, good command of language is apparent, and meaning is usually clear.
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The response competently integrates a critical discussion of ideas in the text with relevant elements of the writer's reading and experience. • The discussion consistently demonstrates an understanding of the main ideas and of some of the complexity in the text. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most ideas are competently developed and approaches to development (e.g., summarizing, evaluating, narrating) are competently used to support and convey the writer's ideas. • Reasons and specific details and examples from the text and from the writer's reading and experience are competently used to develop ideas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An organizational structure is evident and competently supports the writer's central focus and the clarity of the writer's ideas. Relevant ideas are grouped together, and there may be some evidence of progression of ideas. • Though often simple and obvious, transitions are usually made to convey relationships among ideas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most sentences demonstrate competent control, and there is enough structural variety to support the clarity of the writer's ideas. • Word choice is somewhat general but clearly conveys meaning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language use is competent. Grammar, usage, and mechanics are generally correct, and meaning is usually clear.

	Critical Response to the Writing Task and the Text	Development of the Writer's Ideas	Structure of the Response	Language Use: Sentences and Word Choice	Language Use: Grammar, Usage, and Mechanics
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The response integrates some ideas from the text with some relevant elements of the writer's reading and experience, but may do so in an uneven manner. The response demonstrates some understanding of the main ideas in the text, but understanding is uneven, superficial, or incomplete. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development of ideas is general or uneven, but approaches to development sometimes support the clarity of the writer's ideas. The response uses some reasons and specific details and examples from the text and from the writer's reading and experience to develop ideas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The response uses a basic or uneven organizational structure that sometimes supports the writer's central focus and clarity of ideas. For the most part, relevant ideas are grouped together. Some simple and obvious transitions are used to convey relationships among ideas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sentence control is uneven, but there is some structural variety to support the clarity of ideas. Word choice is simple but usually clear enough to convey meaning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Command of language is uneven. Grammar, usage, and mechanics are generally correct, but some errors are distracting and may occasionally impede understanding.
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is little integration of ideas from the text with elements of the writer's reading and experience. The response demonstrates a weak understanding of the main ideas in the text. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development of ideas is weak, and there may be little use of relevant approaches to development. If present, reasons, details, and examples from the text and from the writer's reading and experience are brief, general, inadequately developed, or not clearly relevant. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The response shows an attempt to create a central focus and to put related ideas together, but relationships among ideas may be unclear. Few, if any, transitions are used to convey relationships among ideas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sentences demonstrate weak control, and there is little, if any, sentence variety to provide clarity. Word choice is simple, and sometimes meaning is not clear. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The response demonstrates a weak command of language. Grammar, usage, and mechanics are sometimes correct, but errors are often distracting, and some impede understanding.
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is minimal, if any, integration of ideas from the text with elements of the writer's reading and experience. The response demonstrates little, if any, understanding of the main ideas in the text. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is minimal or no development of ideas and little, if any, use of relevant approaches to development. If any reasons, details, and examples from the text or from the writer's reading and experience are present, these elements are brief, general, undeveloped, or irrelevant. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There may be an attempt to group related ideas together, but the main focus of the response is unclear. Transitions are rarely used. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sentences demonstrate minimal or no control. Word choice is often unclear and often obscures meaning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The response demonstrates minimal command of language. Grammar, usage, and mechanics are often incorrect, and errors frequently impede understanding.

Passing Score Standard

Scorers generally group responses in three ranges. Scores in the lower, 1 & 2 point range represent weak responses to the assignment; scores in the mid-level, 3 & 4 point range represent mid-point responses, while scores in the upper, 5 & 6 point range represent responses that are very good and/or superior.

A total score is calculated for each student paper by adding the two rater scores in each domain and then adding across the domains. Although there are two language domains (Sentence and Word Choice, and Grammar, Usage, and Mechanics), they are counted as a composite single domain in the calculation of a student's total score. This total score is referred to as the student's total weighted score. In this way, we can provide detailed feedback to students and instructors for placement and instructional purposes, while at the same time aligning the CATW with the 4-domain grading of the CPE, and avoiding penalizing ESL students by having their writing double weighted for language skills.

For example, with the first three domains being content domains and the last two being language domains, a student receiving a 4 in each domain by both raters would have a total weighted score of: $2(4+4) + 2(4+4) + 2(4+4) + (4+4) + (4+4) = 64$. You should notice that doubling the scores in the first three domains and adding the language domains without doubling is the mathematical equivalent of taking the average of the two language domain scores and adding it to the scores of the first three domains.

The following table shows the correspondence between a rater score, a score interpretation, and a weighted total score based on the same performance level across all five domains (e.g., all 4's straight across).

Rater Score	Score Interpretation	Weighted Total
6	Superior performance with insight, creativeness	88-96
5	Effective performance with mastery and control	72-87
4	Consistent demonstration of competence, errors do not interfere with coherence	56-71
3	Uneven performance, a basic ability, but significant errors are apparent	40-55
2	Weak attempt, lapses into incoherency	24-39
1	Little or no competency	16-23

A minimum passing score on the CATW is 56, which can be obtained by getting a combination of 3's and 4's in each of the scoring categories: $2(3+4) + 2(3+4) + 2(3+4) + (3+4) + (3+4) = 56$. Of course, there are other combinations of scores that will add up to a 56, but overall this cut score represents a performance where a student has at least one rater giving a four and the other rather giving no less than a three. This cut score has been validated in field testing data both by independent faculty judgment and by actual course placements of the students participating in the field tests.

Although it is up to each college to set the cut score for placement of students into high versus low developmental courses, it is a reasonable assumption that this weighted score would be at the low end of the "3-point" range of scores of 40-55, i.e., 40. This, of course, might change depending on the college's experience and accumulation of data from actual

use of the test. Colleges will rely on their experience and the accumulation of test data to determine the best cut score for their purposes. As with the former writing assessment, colleges are encouraged to take into consideration a student's reading score when making placement decisions.

The CATW Reading Selection

One way to assist students in preparing for the test is to expose them to the types of readings used on the test. Reading passages that serve as the basis for the direct writing sample conform to several specifications:

- The text is 300-350 words in length.
- Passages are at 11th or 12th grade reading level and appropriate to high school graduates. Practice reading passages can be assessed for readability on the Web site: <http://www.editcentral.com/gwt/com.editcentral.EC/EC.html>.
- Topics are those with which high school graduates are very likely to be familiar and have knowledge, experience or interest, and they may be related to general disciplinary areas (for instance, sociology, psychology, etc.).
- Readings are clearly written, with a main thesis statement placed early in the passage, so that they are likely to generate a writing sample that is a critical response to the text. In addition, passages present more than one perspective on a topic.
- Suggested reading passage sources: general interest magazines, newspaper articles, speeches, and essay excerpts from academic anthologies. For example, The Utne Reader, The New York Times, The Week and Slate.com are good sources of engaging general interest articles.
- Texts may be excerpted and edited to simplify vocabulary, phrasing, and length, but must preserve the author's original thesis, main ideas and continuity of ideas.
- Excerpted reading passages should always appear with the original title and a citation reference.
- Topics to be avoided include:
 - those that encourage students to go off on personal tangents without addressing the author's ideas;
 - those involving abstract concepts, or those at a general, non-specific level;
 - those that implicitly or explicitly criticize or denigrate the student (for instance, a reading passage about lack of academic readiness among public university students);
 - topics requiring technical or specialized knowledge that would privilege one group of students over others;

–topics involving death, violence, religion, political points of view, or any racial, ethnic and gender-specific critiques.

- Reading passages always appear with the following standard writing task directions:

Read the passage above and write an essay responding to the ideas it presents. In your essay, be sure to summarize the passage in your own words, stating the author's most important ideas. Develop your essay by identifying one idea in the passage that you feel is especially significant, and explain its significance. Support your claims with evidence or examples drawn from what you have read, learned in school, and/or personally experienced.

Remember to review your essay and make any changes or corrections that are needed to help your reader follow your thinking. You will have 90 minutes to complete your essay.

How to “Unpack” the CATW Writing Prompt

There are two components in the CUNY Assessment Test in Writing prompt. The first is the reading passage, and the second component – the “Writing Directions” – follows the reading. It should be noted that the writing directions reflect the five evaluative criteria of the analytic rubric.

“Read the passage above and write an essay responding to the ideas it presents.”

This sentence instructs the student to respond directly to the reading passage and stipulates that the written response must address the ideas presented in the text. This aspect of the response is evaluated in Domain 1: Critical Response to Writing Task and the Text.

“In your essay, be sure to summarize the passage in your own words, stating the author’s most important ideas.”

This direction focuses on the student’s understanding of the reading passage, and the ability to present this understanding as part of an organized response, as defined in Domain 1 and Domain 3: Structure of the Response.

“Develop your essay by identifying one idea in the passage that you feel is especially significant, and explain its significance.”

This direction instructs the student to develop an organized piece of writing that focuses on a specific idea in the reading passage. It should be noted here that the student is free to choose any “significant idea” and develop the explanation of this idea by using one or more

possible rhetorical structures. These aspects of the response are evaluated in Domains 2 (Development of Writer’s Ideas) and 3 (Structure of the Response).

“Support your claims with evidence or examples drawn from what you have read, learned in school, and/or personally experienced.”

Here the student is reminded that the ideas presented in the essay must be supported with details, examples, or personal experiences, which may be drawn from a variety of sources, but which must support specific ideas from the reading passage. The student should demonstrate some ability to integrate supporting details with reference to specific ideas from the reading passage. This aspect of the response is evaluated in Domains 2 (Development of Writer’s Ideas) and 3 (Structure of the Response).

“Remember to review your essay and make any changes or corrections that will help your reader follow your thinking.”

The student is reminded to edit and proofread the essay for clarity and correctness. This direction instructs the student to address the criteria evaluated in Domains 4 (Language Use: Sentences and Word Choice) and 5 (Language Use: Grammar, Usage, Mechanics). Students are also being reminded to revisit the criteria evaluated in Domains 1 (completeness), 2 (development) and 3 (organization).

“You will have 90 minutes to complete your essay.”

The student is reminded to be aware of time management during the exam.

Writing the CATW Essay

In order to be successful on this new test, there are basic ideas about the CATW essay that students need to understand.

The Nature of the Test

The CUNY Assessment Test in Writing is a text-based direct writing sample that reflects in its design the kinds of text-based writing done in introductory college-level courses in all discipline areas throughout the university. Text-based critical analysis is also generally acknowledged to be the gold standard best practice for writing assignments in college composition courses nationwide. The CATW assesses college readiness in writing and introductory college-level courses by aligning its prompt with the type of writing assignment typically given in first-year composition and discipline content courses.

Components of the Test

Students preparing for the CATW should be instructed about key components of the essay, as described in the analytic rubric:

- They must be able to read and understand a short (300-350 words) reading passage written at the 11th or 12th grade reading level.
- They should demonstrate the ability to identify the author's main idea – and important supporting ideas – in the reading passage.
- Students should be able to read and understand the writing directions that accompany the reading passage, and address all parts of the writing task.
- The essay they write in response to the reading passage should contain a brief summary of the reading's main idea and supporting ideas (two or three key points in the reading).
- The response essay must make direct reference to ideas in the reading passage, and these references may be made either with direct citation or paraphrasing.
- The response should be organized in a logical and coherent way, with appropriate use of transitions to connect the student's ideas, supporting details, and examples.
- There should be integration of ideas from the reading passage with the student's own thoughts and ideas about the text, with some degree of critical thinking evident in the student's response.
- The student should identify and address a specific idea in the reading passage that the student feels is "significant" (it needn't be the author's main idea) and develop an essay in response to that idea, expanding through the use of explanation, supporting details, personal experience, and/or other reading the student may have done.
- The student's essay should have a clear organizational structure, with an introduction containing a thesis and summary of the reading passage, a progressive development of the student's ideas through expansion, use of supporting details and examples, and a clearly written ending.
- The response essay should demonstrate control over sentence structure and an awareness of sentence variety. Both sentence construction and word choice should be used to convey meaning effectively and with clarity. Grammar and mechanics should be generally correct.
- Students should budget their time during the exam period (90 minutes) to allow for proofreading and editing. They should check their essay for errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

Test Preparation Strategies

Standardized test-taking is an unfamiliar and often highly stressful event for most of our students. It's important for instructors, and any other colleagues involved in the test preparation process, to spend some time addressing the pragmatic requirements of test-taking and to share with students effective strategies for maximizing their performance on the exam.

Classroom Activities

- Students should be reminded about the ways in which the CATW is “aligned” with specific writing practices already familiar to them through their other courses, whether in introductory discipline courses or developmental reading, writing and ESL courses.
- Students should become thoroughly familiar with the structure and content of the CATW through discussion of sample readings and writing prompts prior to taking the “real” exam.
- Practice writing brief summaries of short readings prior to taking the CATW. When assigning readings for test preparation, keep in mind the specifications discussed in “The CATW Reading Selection” section of this handbook.
- Review the Writing Directions for the CATW with students prior to the exam, so that they are completely familiar with the sequence of directions for the writing task.
- Discuss time management of the 90-minute test period; students should be proactive in constructing a timeline for each part of the reading and writing task, so that they can finish the exam on time. Students should experience a few timed practice tests. Your Testing Office can provide you with a script used by proctors to administer the test.
- Make sure that students have a few practice exams which are scored and explained before they do the “real” exam; this way they’ll be experienced with the entire test-taking process well ahead of time.
- When preparing syllabi for courses in which the CATW will be administered, it's advisable to introduce test prep classroom activities early in the semester and integrate them throughout the rest of the course. However, test preparation should not in any way drive the curriculum so that there is overemphasis on teaching to the test. Approximately three weeks prior to re-testing, increase the number of test preparation activities to adequately prepare students for re-testing.

Information for Students

- Review the CATW analytic rubric with students so that they understand how they are being evaluated. Students are empowered when the assessment process is

demystified. This may require re-packaging the rubric in order to make it more student-friendly.

- Explain how the scoring process works.
- Prior to the exam, explain the process of getting back their results, as well as what happens in the event that they do – or don’t – pass. For more information about this process, consult your department Chair and/or Testing Office.
- Remind students about “deal-breakers” on the exam; for instance, they must address all parts of the Writing Directions, must provide a summary of the reading, must refer directly to ideas from the reading in their essays, must write an organized response, and develop their ideas as thoroughly as possible.
- For the first few semesters subsequent to October 1, 2010, explain to students the ways in which the CATW is different from the ACT writing test they may have taken one or more times prior to this exam.

Test-Taking Strategies

- Make sure that students know exactly what will happen when the proctor comes to administer the test, and explain the procedure for test administration.
- Discuss practical strategies for stress-management; telling students not be anxious – or to control their anxiety – is usually counter-productive, and in fact will only increase anxiety for many students. Instead, explain how to reduce test-taking stress, or even make it work for them!
- Practical advice will help students minimize test anxiety: come early to the test, make sure to be well rested, have extra pens/pencils, eat something light before the exam, have a time management plan firmly in mind before beginning the test, remember to take some deep breaths before and during the exam, etc.
- Students will feel more confident about taking the test if they have had a few practice test sessions prior to the “real” test day.

Sample Test Preparation Activities for the CATW

On the following page is an example of two classroom activities that instructors might use to help students prepare for the CATW. Task 1 addresses reading comprehension, text annotation, and idea development. The second task focuses on the use of critical thinking to support an idea.

Classroom Test Preparation Activities for the CATW

Read the following passage, adapted from an article by Fareed Zakaria, Time Magazine, November 14, 2011:

For the past month we have all marveled at the life of Steve Jobs, the adopted son of working-class parents, who dropped out of college and became one of the great technologists and businessmen of our time. He was of course an extraordinary individual, and that explains much of his success, but his environment might also have played a role. Part of the environment was education. And it is worth noting that Jobs got a great secondary education. The school he attended, Homestead High in Cupertino, California, was a first-rate public school that gave him a grounding in both liberal arts and technology.

As American education has declined, the median wages of the American worker have stagnated, and social mobility—the beating heart of the American dream—has slowed to a standstill. Education is and always has been the fastest way up the socioeconomic ladder. And the payoff from a good education remains evident even in this weak economy. The unemployment rate for college graduates is just 4%, but for high school dropouts it is 14%.

American education at its best teaches you how to solve problems, truly understand the material, question authority, think for yourself and be creative. It teaches you to learn what you love and to love learning. These are incredibly important values, and they are why the U.S. has been able to maintain an edge in creative industries and innovation in general. The U.S. should fix its educational system by emphasizing the basics—like hard work—again but also by renewing its distinctly American character.

Task 1

Read the passage a second time—this time with a pen in your hand. Underline or number statements and phrases that you think are important. Is there a sentence that you think captures the main point of Zakaria's essay? Circle words that you don't recognize. Are there any important statistics? Make a note of those, too. Once you have finished **annotating** the passage, write a summary in which you identify three or four of Zakaria's most significant ideas.

Task 2

Choose an idea from the passage that you think is important or interesting. It doesn't necessarily have to be an idea from your summary. Develop your chosen idea by considering the following questions: Why did you select the idea? Do you agree with Zakaria? If you do, explain why. Do you disagree? If so, explain why. What personal experience(s) have you—or someone you know—had that relate to the idea on which you've chosen to focus? What have you read, or seen in the media, that support or contradict your chosen idea? Write a paragraph in which you answer these questions.

Sample Student Papers

These papers are responses to the writing assignment and the reading text: "Hype," by Kalle Lasn in *Signs of Life in the USA: Readings on Popular Culture for Writers*, 4th ed. (Sonia Maasik & Jack Solomon, eds.) Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003. 217-220.

A copy of this test form is on page 2.

Paper #1

I was hooked from the opening sentence of this passage, and as I finished, I couldn't resist a small internal cheer. I believe most of us would agree with the author's sentiments, in that advertisements (ads) are truly the "most...toxic of the mental pollutants"[line 1]' Who doesn't fly through the channels when there is a break in your program, and the endless commercials, and infomercial begin? Today, our lives are saturated with ads occupying every square inch of viewing space. It is enough to make one scream!

The statistics the author quotes are staggering. To imagine that "12 billion display ads, 3 million radio commercials, and over 200,000 TV commercials" air each day, and this is in North America alone. By my count that adds up to 12,003,200,000 types of ads each day. Or, on a more personal note, each of us is exposed to more than 2,000 advertisements/some form of marketing message each day! The author's view is easily apart from the description of this (utterly ridiculous) amount of advertising as "pollution flooding the brain," "dumped into our environment." 12,003,200,000. A ludicrous number. It means that our minds are continually bombarded, assaulted with a message of consumerism, courtesy of corporate America. Another outstanding factor is the variety these ads take.

The author mentions buses, billboards, stadiums, gas nozzles, even shopping carts! Anywhere you look you can find ads. It actually reminded me of a fantasy novel by Michael Crichton. Unfortunately, the name escapes me at this point, but what I found remarkable was that in the Protagonist's world, "bio-ads" were the norm. Advertisements were placed onto living organisms such as fish, coral reefs, birds, etc. , through genetic manipulation. Thus turning beautiful and majestic living creatures into cheap advertisements. Imagine, if you will, a dolphin with Chrysler emblazoned onto its side, or a Golden Eagle with the Lockheed-Martin symbol upon its plumage. While we may laugh at such a ridiculous mental image, it should also make us pause for thought. I just described a novel, a work of fiction, but is today's world really so different? As we learned from the article "Hype," advertisements are found EVERYWHERE, on our own clothes, on cereal boxes, on buses and taxis, maybe it's only a matter of time before the natural beauty we so admire is exploited as well. To return to the novel, entire species were licensed by certain companies, all sanctioned in an effort to preserve them. The thinking being that businesses

would protect their “advertisements.” Effective, true, but what a sad state for the world to be in, a world corrupted by advertising.

I'll stay with the prevalence of advertising for just a little longer, simply because when I think about it, the author is completely right – nowhere to run and hide. I remember when I first came to America a year ago (I'm originally from Barbados), one of the first things I wanted to do, was visit Times Square. Why? Because every movie, or television program, I had seen about, or set in, New York had a scene with the huge building-sized ads of Times Square in it. An article I was reading in the IEEE journal recently dealt with a company seeking governmental permission to place ads on the moon. That article in turn reminded me of another I had read previously. When subliminal messaging was first being researched, several companies paid movie theatres to flash their ads on the screen during the showing. The ad would flash so quickly, that the conscious mind would be unable to register it. They just wanted to see if they could subconsciously cause individuals to crave their product, (I believe it was the Coca-Cola company). To return to my own experiences, one of the most novel things to me when I first arrived, was the bus stop ads which actually change every few minutes. I would never have dreamed of such an approach.

I suppose I've written all of this to show, as the author points out, how advertising permeates our entire society. There's a chemical term which I think would apply to this, the Point of Saturation. Basically, when you have mixed so much solute (e.g. sugar) into a solvent (e.g. water) to the point that the solvent can hold no more of the solute (In my example, any further sugar crystals would just drop to the bottom), it had reached its P.O.S. Somehow, I think this aptly describes our minds when it comes to advertising. I wonder if we can take much more without any adverse effects. The author starts to delve into this when they mention how children watch ads in the classroom, and in the last sentence [kid singing the ... song]. Actually, most advertisements target children. They want children to see the ads, desire the product, and then beg their parents to buy it. As an additional bonus, this constant message of consumerism at such a young age will ensure that many children wanting (overspending) all sorts of products into adulthood. To illustrate, one study found that Polish families spend the most family time when shopping together. Maybe facts like this, and the rising number of families in perpetual credit card debt, can be taken as evidence of the adverse effects of advertising.

All things considered, we suffer. We are victims of a malady known as overabundant advertising. Maybe one day, a commission will be formed to limit the amount, and location of advertisements companies can use. But until then, one thing is certain. It is only a matter of time before we all begin bearing that Oscar Meyer song in our heads.

Paper #1 received a score of **6,6,6,6,6**. A discussion of the score for each domain follows.

Critical Response to the Text: 6

The response integrates ideas from the text and from the writer's own experience in many ways – e.g., by effectively using images and data from the text, by incorporating the writer's summary of the Michael Crichton novel, and by presenting the analogy between the pervasiveness of advertising and the “point of saturation.” The response demonstrates a clear and thorough understanding of the main ideas and complexity of ideas in the text by discussing the pervasiveness of advertising and the impact of this pervasiveness on people today.

Development of Ideas: 6

Summary of main ideas in the passage is integrated throughout the response, and the writer draws upon a variety of personal resources to evaluate and extend the argument in the passage. Development is extensive, detailed, and relevant to the main focus of the reading and the essay.

Structure of the Response: 6

The response has a strong central focus and maintains that focus throughout the essay. There is a well-designed progression of ideas here as the writer moves from a summary of the statistics in the passage (and the writer's judgment of their implications), to the writer's extension of ideas in the passage via discussion of the Michael Crichton novel, to the writer's own personal experience and observations, which demonstrate that extreme circumstances exist outside science fiction. The conclusion brings the essay back to the central image of the passage. Transitions are used effectively to introduce new ideas and to guide understanding of relationships among ideas.

Sentences and Word Choice: 6

Both elements are very strong here and the essay has a strong voice as a result. From the beginning (“I was hooked from the opening sentence of this passage...”) to the end, which brings the essay back to the imagery of the passage, sentences are very well controlled and word choice is precise and vigorous (“staggering,” “flooding the brain,” “permeates”).

Grammar, Usage and Mechanics: 6

There are a few errors, but overall, strong command of language is apparent.

Paper #2

Advertisements have been influencing the American lifestyle and regulating what we buy, eat, or even do. Over the years, these companies have grown larger and figured out more ways to put advertisements into our every day life. In “Hype,” Lasn states “There is nowhere to run. No one is exempt and no one

will be spared.” This tells us that no matter where you are, there is going to be some form of advertisement trying to influence you. I agree with Lasn that advertisements are toxic to our way of thinking and decision making.

Everywhere I go, I see a form of advertisement trying to influence me to try or buy something. According to Lasn, there’s an estimated 12 billion display ads, 3 million radio commercials and over 200,000 T.V. commercials, all of which are trying to influence me. Sometimes it is necessary to get a break from these ads because it can be like taunting you everywhere you go. There are times where I can just read about the product description and decide for myself if I’m going to purchase it or not, without having any type of pressure or influence to it.

Too much of anything eventually can become harmful. I can accept a few commercials and ads that inform me about a product or service but when it is everywhere you turn, then it is a problem. A good example is when I use the restroom, sometimes they have ads right on top of the urinal, so as I’m standing there I’m face to face with some type of advertisement.

Even though advertisements can boost a company’s revenue, it can also end up cause trouble in society. The cigarette and alcohol industry spend more money than any other to advertise their products. Some of these forms of advertisement can lead people to thinking you cannot have a good time without their products. So, in return, teens and minor can be influenced to smoke and drink which can lead to a negative effect on society. When Lasn states,

“Advertisements are the most prevalent and toxic of the mental pollutants,” it is true, because then it’s as this industry wants me to stop using my brain or to think for myself.

Advertisements have crept into all of our lives without most of us not noticing it. Maybe that’s one of the factors, that the industry is trying to think for us instead of us thinking for ourselves. Regardless of what we are doing, as mentioned by Lasn, filling up gas, walking down the street, or even driving in the country, advertisements are finding a way to reach us. Some of the peaceful ways and less-advertising days many have only been experienced by our parents or grandparents, and our society has turned to a society influenced by commercials. We all need a break at some point.

Paper #2 received a score of **5,5,5,5,5**. A discussion of the score for each domain follows.

Critical Response to the Text: 5

The response frequently interacts with the passage by integrating data and images from the passage with the writer's own observations and judgments. The response demonstrates a good understanding of the text by addressing the pervasiveness of advertising and its negative impact on society – for example, the writer notes that ads for cigarettes and alcohol may persuade people that they must use these products to enjoy themselves. The response also briefly addresses the idea that persistent exposure to ads seems designed to make people stop thinking for themselves.

Development of Ideas: 5

The response integrates summary of the main ideas in the passage throughout the essay and effectively uses ideas and quotations from the text and from the writer's own experience to explain and evaluate the claims in the passage. Development of the writer's own ideas, however, is somewhat limited – much of the detail in the essay is derived from the reading passage. The claim that advertising has a “negative effect on society” is not clearly supported with evidence.

Structure of the Response: 5

The overall structure of the essay is conventional, but some progression of ideas is demonstrated by the approach of first describing the pervasiveness of advertising and then discussing its negative impact on society. Some transitions are used, though the transition from the first part of the discussion to the second is not skillfully controlled at the end of the second paragraph and in the third paragraph at the top of page 2.

Sentences and Word Choice: 5

For the most part, sentences are well controlled and there is some sentence variety. The response demonstrates a good ability to use complex sentence structures to show relationships among ideas. Word choice is clear and usually specific, though not sophisticated.

Grammar, Usage and Mechanics: 5

A good command of these elements is evident, but agreement errors (“I can accept a few commercials and ads...but when it is everywhere”) and vague pronouns (“it can be like taunting you”), as well as some punctuation errors, prevent the response from demonstrating strong command.

Paper #3

In "Hype," Kalle Lasn speaks of the significant number of advertisements that people are exposed to today. He refers to them as "mental pollutants," implying that these ads are taking over our minds and playing a significant role in the way we think. Although I agree that I see hundreds of ads everyday, I feel that they are, in some ways, necessary to our functioning in society.

When I sit down and turn on the television, there's a good chance many of the channels I flip through are showing a commercial for a new product, or a new movie, or a new T.V. series. Every ten minutes, the show I'm watching goes into commercials for five minutes, in which time I may see five to ten different commercials. I don't always realize it when I'm watching T.V., but I receive information about a lot of new things. I may learn about what hot new gadgets are available or about what kind of movies are showing in theatres. When I'm in the train or on the bus, there are ads within the cars, and also many can be seen outside through the window. Even when I'm on the internet, almost every website has ads by Google. I don't always immediately take note of the ad I see, but I remember seeing a video once that explained how an ad may just be looked upon and the image of which remains in our brains, affecting us psychologically. Thus ads are a significant in our lives.

Although it may be irritating to see an ad come on in the middle of your favorite show, the information supplied by that ad may not be available to you anywhere else. Corporations create ads to keep us updated on what is new. In a world where everyone is so busy working and studying, many people won't take the time to research and investigate what's new in the world. Ads keep us informed while we're busy doing more important things. Even if somebody's not looking for a specific item, they may see something in an ad that interests them, and may otherwise not know about it. Ads are the only ways for hundreds of millions of people to find out about something.

Kalle Lasn is right that ads are everywhere and play a significant role in our lives. Probably most of the ads we see won't be beneficial to us, but the concept of advertising is essential in our world for keeping people informed and for helping the economy.

Paper #3 received a score of **4,4,4,4,4**. A discussion of the score for each domain follows.

Critical Response to the Text: 4

The essay includes some integration of ideas from the text with the writer's ideas, especially in the second paragraph. While the response reflects an understanding of

the main ideas in the text by acknowledging that advertising is pervasive, the argument that advertising can be useful to people is not specifically relevant to the main idea in the reading passage because it is based on the content of ads, not the pervasiveness of advertising.

Development of Ideas: 4

Some summary of the main idea in the passage is present, but the evaluation of ideas is limited by the writer's shift in focus between the pervasiveness of advertising and its content. Development is somewhat repetitious (e.g., the third paragraph adds little to what was said in the previous paragraph) and, while there are some specific details and examples from the writer's experience, most discussion is general.

Structure of the Response: 4

An overall structure is apparent, but the focus of the response shifts somewhat in places. For example, in the second paragraph, where the main focus seems initially to be on the pervasiveness of advertising, the discussion shifts between details supporting that idea to discussion of what the writer is learning about "new gadgets," then back to the idea of pervasiveness – and then returns again to the usefulness of advertising in the third paragraph. The response uses some transitions to convey relationships, but coherence is somewhat flawed by the shifting focus of the response.

Sentences and Word Choice: 4

The response reflects competence in the use of complex sentence structures to show relationships among ideas within a sentence. Word choice is appropriate and usually clear.

Grammar, Usage and Mechanics: 4

There are a few errors, but in general, the response shows competent command of language.

Paper #4

The excerpted from Kalle Lasn clearly illustrates over use of advertisements and how people are mesmerized by the items being sold. She mentions advertisements are being brainwashed into everyone's brains and no one has come to acknowledge that the commercials being played or visualized are taking over people's lives. It is sage to say that advertisements are a person's guideline in life. After the Industrial Revolution almost everyone wants to transfigure into a modernized individual. As ads are exposed many individuals will purchase the item which it brings a sense of accomplishment towards the American way of thinking. Kalle Lasn provides several examples to portray why advertisements are mesmerizing those into buying items which are not necessary and are posted or shown rapidly during our daily life.

Advertisements are easily accessible walking a block or any block provides us with useless advertisements that “pollute our minds”. For example ages from 10 to 50 upgrade their cellphones just satisfy their idea of modernizing. A cellphone was created for convenience of communication. Although many of us want to purchase the latest i-phone or blackberry. Advertisements are advising people how to live their lives.

The media itself sends us thousands of marketing messages per day. The media explores on the issue of obesity America is suffering with but in the next minutes a fast food restaurant commercial is acknowledged. Followed by video game commercials leading into a weight loss commercial. Advertisements doesn't have a valid message because its advocating to eat while playing video games or watching TV. Although on the contrary it is advised to lose weight because the previous commercials could cause medical problems. The vast amount of advertisements shown are implying on how we should live are lives and most of the population is agreeing with this pathetic lifestyle.

Kalle Lasn clarifies to Americans that advertisements are vastly shown in everyplace we commute to; this action leads our brains to analyze what our actions are based on such as getting the new Blackberry because it is a modernized item which leads to a person being a high acceptance in society because of other commercials “polluting their minds.”

Paper #4 received a score of **3,3,3,3,3**. A discussion of the score for each domain follows.

Critical Response to the Text: 3

The response includes some integration of ideas from the passage with the writer's own ideas and shows some understanding of the main idea that advertising is pervasive by quoting the idea that advertising is “polluting our minds.” However, the response does not convey a clear understanding of why Lasn claims that advertising is harmful.

Development of Ideas: 3

In general, the response is very reliant on the ideas and language in the passage, making it difficult to discern the writer's own response. In the first paragraph, for example, it is difficult to distinguish between summary and evaluation of the ideas in the passage. Development is uneven. Though general for the most part, there is some detail in places (e.g., in the writer's description of conflicting messages provided at the beginning of the third paragraph). Relationships between claims and support are not always clear and the reader may be confused by the frequency of movement from one idea to another.

Structure of the Response: 3

The response has a beginning-middle-ending but lacks a clear central focus, so coherence is weak. Some transitions are used – sometimes effectively – as in the description of the ads with contrasting messages on p. 2.

Sentences and Word Choice: 3

Sentences are somewhat controlled, but word choice is often not appropriate (e.g., “As ads are exposed...,” “the media explores on the issue of obesity... but [then a fast food commercial] is acknowledged”).

Grammar, Usage and Mechanics: 3

Grammar, usage and mechanics are often correct, but a number of errors are distracting and some make understanding difficult, particularly in the last paragraph.

Paper #5

Dear Sonia maasik and Jack Solomon:

I have read your opinions about how are advertisements forming part of human life. I think that your point of view is reflecting Advertisements like the most horrible thing that the company executive cando. However, I do not agree with yo because from one way or another it helps companies to make more successful their duties and a busy society to be informed about what are companies offering?

First, all companies have something to offer specially if wpeople are needing this. For instance, In the last month I knew two companies which had t close their services because they were lack of knowledge about Advertisements.

They had many things that people need, but nobody could buy anything because those pwople did not know about what they were offering. For this reason I believe that advertisements are very need in our everyday.

Secondly, I know that if someone wants information about something he or she has to be look for, but US is a country which has everyone too busy for that noone has time to be looking for. Now, everyone has the time to see those advertisements in usual places: buses, billboards and stadiums because people are interacting with those places everyday in their lives. For instance, people who use the bus to go to their jobs and come back home can see Advertisements on the Bus. Before I was coming to register at Hostos Community College I saw an advertisement on the bus which took all my attention. It said that Hostos has the Best programs for Nursing since I saw that information I cam to Hostos and registered for the next semester. For this

reason I consider advertisements like something necessary for companies and our society.

Finally, I hope that you understand my opinions and ideas about why advertisements are very important for me and How this can help our society. If was a pleasure to share my opinios with you.

Paper #5 received a score of **2,2,3,2,2**. A discussion of the score for each domain follows.

Critical Response to the Text: 2

The response demonstrates a weak understanding of the text. It shows an understanding that the text is saying advertising is harmful, but does not reflect an understanding of the claims in the passage about the pervasiveness and invasiveness of advertising. Acknowledgment of the reading passage is minimal (“I have read your opinions...,” “I do not agree with you...”). You will also note that the response uses the format of the current test, which is inappropriate to this new writing assignment.

Development of Ideas: 2

The response presents a very brief summary of the passage in the first paragraph, but later only alludes to the passage. Development is limited to statements about the usefulness of advertising illustrated by a description of how an ad on a bus influenced the writer’s choice of a college.

Structure of the Response: 3

The response has a clear beginning-middle-ending, and the writer’s main focus is maintained, though the presentation of ideas is sometimes confusing. Simple transitions are used (“First,” “Secondly”).

Sentences and Word Choice: 2

Control of sentences is weak. Word choice is simple but usually clear.

Grammar, Usage and Mechanics: 2

Errors are frequent and show weak control of language. There are many problems with word forms, subject-verb agreement, vague pronoun references and incorrect pronoun-antecedent agreement, punctuation, and so on. These errors are distracting and sometimes impede understanding.

Paper #6

The main point the author was making was that now and days Advertisements are very were you go. Halle Lasn was explening that she is seeing Advertisements every place she will go. She also sad that there is nobody that is going to be exempt from seeing Advertsiement in there lifes.

This has become true in our life. ever place we go we will se and Advertisement placed some were. You will see advertisement in bus you will see them on taxes, tran, billboards and stadium. Even when we are home we will se some advertisement if we are playing some games we will se the advertisement on the game. Whe we ar waching some tv we see advertisement also in the internet will see them there also.

Now why do we see all this advertisement every where is because they are paying for it to be there. So when we are waching a show and we see the advertisement that is now the show is getting pay. Also on the radio they say it in the radio that they need to go on commercial to get pay.

Paper #6 received a score of **1,1,1,1,1**. A discussion of the score for each domain follows.

Critical Response to the Text: 1

There is a minimal understanding of the text here -- the first paragraph shows that the writer understood Lasn's idea that advertising is pervasive. However, the response does not show an understanding of Lasn's claim that the pervasiveness of advertising is harmful.

Development of Ideas: 1

There is a little development of the idea that advertising is pervasive, though development is heavily dependent on the reading passage for its details. The response does offer an explanation of why advertising is pervasive, but the presentation of this idea is general and repetitious.

Structure of the Response: 1

There is a rudimentary beginning-middle-ending here, but the main focus of the response is unclear. There are just a couple of transitions.

Sentences and Word Choice: 1

Control of sentences is very weak. Word choice is heavily dependent on the reading passage.

Grammar, Usage and Mechanics: 1

Problems with syntax, verbs, pronouns, spelling, capitalization and punctuation are frequent and they impede understanding.

University Policies and Procedures for the CATW

David Crook, the University Dean for Institutional Research and Assessment, has convened a panel of CUNY faculty members who are charged with developing and implementing university policies and procedures for the CUNY Assessment Test in Writing.

This manual will be updated to reflect any policy and procedural changes, and unless otherwise noted, can be assumed to be the same as those currently in place.

Prepared by staff of the CUNY Office of Assessment: Sue Young, Eve Zarin, Diane Foster, Marilyn Maiz, and Rosanne Cook, Consultant to the Office of Assessment.