

UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAM

Writing Skills Assessment

TIPS AND STRATEGIES

- Read the question carefully, including the directions for each writing task.
- Make sure you have taken all parts of a question into account before you begin responding to it.
- Pay special attention to verbs used in the directions that identify the type of writing you are to do. In the sample Persuasion task, for example, you are to “persuade,” “consider pros and cons,” “address objections,” and “analyze.” In the sample Position task you are to “discuss,” “accept, reject, or alter,” and “support.”
- Take a few minutes to think about the question and plan a response before you begin to write. You may find it helpful to jot down some ideas or a brief outline.
- Avoid using language that is considered slang or overly casual.
- Take care to organize your ideas and develop them fully, but leave time to reread your response, check it against the question, and make revisions that you think would improve it in the time allowed.

If you don't know what type of writing is called for by the directions before you take the writing assessment, you have several resources. You could ask a tutor in a departmental writing lab, ask an instructor who is familiar with your writing, read the appropriate sections in a composition textbook, or search the net. For example, Purdue University's Online Writing Lab offers advice on writing essay exams at:

http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_essay.html

or

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/esl/eslaudience.html>

In the Writing Skills Assessment (WSA) you have 90 minutes to plan and write two essays. Part of your job will be to manage your time so that you complete both essays in one and one-half hours. One essay is based on a short workplace scenario (called the “Persuasion task”) and one is based on an assertion (called the “Position task”). In the Persuasion task you will be asked to persuade a particular reader of your point of view or recommended action. In the Position task you will be asked to think critically about a given statement and write a unified essay discussing why you accept, reject, or qualify it. Neither task presupposes specific knowledge of business or of other specific content areas. Typically, there is no “right” course of action or position. Rather, your essays will be evaluated on how insightfully you think about the task, how well you support your position and how clearly you organize and express your ideas. For the Persuasion task your writing should be appropriate for the designated writer, reader, and situation. For the Position task, you are addressing a general audience. Simple, concise, compelling language usually works best for this audience.

The following pages include general strategies for taking the writing assessment, a sample Persuasion task and a sample Position task. Following each task are three actual student responses. The responses illustrate three levels of performance on a six-point scoring scale: high (5-6), middle (4), and low (2-3). These correspond, respectively, to a strong or outstanding response, an adequate response, and a limited or flawed response. No samples are available of papers scored at 1 or 0. Also included are the scoring guides used by the scorers in evaluating the Persuasion and Position responses.

SCORING

6	Outstanding	A paper in this category <u>stands out because it demonstrates clear and consistent competence</u> , although it may have occasional errors.
5	Strong	A paper in this category <u>demonstrates reasonably consistent competence</u> , although it will have occasional errors or lapses in quality.
4	Adequate	A paper in this category <u>demonstrates adequate competence</u> , although it will have occasional errors and lapses in quality.
3	Limited	A paper in this category <u>demonstrates developing competence</u> .
2	Flawed	A paper in this category <u>demonstrates some incompetence</u> .
1	Fundamentally Deficient	A paper in this category <u>demonstrates incompetence</u> .
0	Off Topic or Illegible	Does not address the topic or cannot be read.

SCORING GUIDE FOR PERSUASION TASK

General Directions for Scoring: Scores given to papers range from six down to one. Readers should reward what has been done well. Scores should reflect the range of excellence in the papers that have been written on the topic. Because each topic places unique demands on student writers, readers should score papers primarily in reference to the standards that emerge from sample papers for a particular topic. There are, however, some broad categories that define the score ranges, no matter what topic has been administered and no matter how broad or narrow the range of skills of those responding. These categories are listed below.

Score of 6: Outstanding

A paper in this category stands out because it demonstrates clear and consistent competence, although it may have occasional errors. Such a paper exhibits most or all of the following strengths:

- addresses the writing task effectively and insightfully, providing a well-reasoned solution that displays analysis of data (*both* numerical *and* verbal)
- is well organized, with a clear overall strategy
- is fully developed, with pertinent support for ideas presented
- style and tone is easy to read and appropriate for the intended writer, reader and situation
- displays consistent facility with written English (grammar, syntax, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling)

Score of 5: Strong

A paper in this category demonstrates reasonably consistent competence, although it will have occasional errors or lapses in quality. Such a paper exhibits most or all of the following strengths:

- addresses the writing task effectively, providing a reasonable solution that displays analysis of data (numerical or verbal)
- is generally well organized
- is generally well developed, using appropriate examples to support ideas
- in style and tone is easy to read and appropriate for the intended reader
- displays facility with written English (grammar, syntax, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling)

Score of 4: Adequate

A paper in this category demonstrates adequate competence, although it will have occasional errors and lapses in quality. Such a paper exhibits most or all of the following characteristics:

- addresses the writing task, may display analysis of data (numerical or verbal)
- is organized and adequately developed
- in style and tone is generally easy to read and appropriate for the intended reader
- displays adequate but inconsistent facility with written English (grammar, syntax, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling)

Score of 3: Limited

A paper in this category demonstrates developing competence. Such a paper either does not address the writing task effectively or addresses the writing task but exhibits one or more of the following weaknesses:

- is inadequately organized
- is limited in development
- is inconsistent or inappropriate in style and tone
- displays limited facility with written English (grammar, syntax, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling)

Score of 2: Flawed

A paper in this category demonstrates some incompetence. Such a paper

- does not address the writing task effectively. In addition, such a paper is flawed by one or more of the following weaknesses:
- has poor organization
- has thin development
- is generally inappropriate in style and tone
- displays a lack of facility with written English (grammar, syntax, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling)

Score of 1: Fundamentally Deficient

A paper in this category demonstrates incompetence. Such a paper

- provides little evidence of the ability to address the writing task effectively. In addition, such a paper is flawed by one or more of the following weaknesses:
- has very poor organization
- has very thin development
- is inappropriate in style and tone
- contains a pervasive pattern of errors in written English (grammar, syntax, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling) so severe that meaning is obscured

Score of 0: Off Topic or Illegible

SAMPLE PERSUASION TASK AND SAMPLE PAPERS

Sample Persuasion Task

Cathy Aarts is at a crossroads. She has been working out of her home in Boise, Idaho, making gold-plated holiday ornaments for the past three years, ever since she gave up work as a real estate agent. That job had been too demanding for the mother of pre-school twins. "You have to work at it all the time," she complained to another agent and friend, Tomi Clark. The pace of the holiday ornament business is more predictable, and she loves the creativity it requires. In the spring Cathy solicits custom orders and works on designs. In the summer she communicates with a supplier on the East Coast. In the fall she advertises her standard ornaments and processes orders. In November she and her husband, who works full time at his own automobile repair shop, pack and ship ornaments out of their basement. Sales for last year were \$30,000, about double those of the year before.

But Cathy misses being around people. And she would like to earn more money. Now that her kids are in school, she is toying with the idea of becoming a residential real estate appraiser. Estimating the value of residential property at various times (such as prior to a sale, when getting insurance, in the event of a loss, or during a divorce or bankruptcy), she would be in frequent contact with other adults. Cathy estimates start-up costs at about \$10,000—to cover a 75-hour licensing course, business stationery, professional association dues, and cameras. She already has a computer, printer, and software. She has read an estimate of typical annual revenues (gross income before expenses) of \$40,000, based on completing four appraisals a week at \$200 each.

Cathy asks Tomi for advice. Should she stick with the ornaments, move into real estate appraisal, or...?

In the role of Tomi Clark, write a letter to Cathy Aarts persuading her of the direction you think she should take.

Base your writing upon analysis rather than simply restatement of information in the problem. There is no "right" answer. You may assume any information that might be helpful. Consider the pros and cons of your position, and directly address objections Cathy might have to your arguments.

Sample Persuasion Paper: High (score of 6)

Although papers in the high category differ in approach and quality, they stand out from other papers in a set because they address the writing task effectively, evidenced, for example, by analysis of data and by original and relevant strategies, ideas and examples. Their writing shows sensitivity to what style and tone are appropriate for the intended writer, reader, and situation. Papers in this category are not perfect, nor are they expected to be, for each is only a first draft written in the allotted time and is scored high mainly in reference to the standards that emerge from other papers on the same topic. The paper below is representative of responses in this category. It demonstrates analytic ability, original thinking, and writing competence. It follows directions by directly addressing objections Cathy might have to the writer's position. The organization follows a plan, and the style and tone are appropriate for the situation.

Throughout the last three years you have demonstrated to me that you are passionate about your ornament business. I see that the artistic creativity you have cultivated is an essential outlet for you. The doubling of your sales in the last year is a strong indication that your ornaments have a demanding market; your start-up idea does not afford you this luxury.

I am sure you are aware that nine of ten new businesses fail. Remaining in the real estate business I have seen the rapid growth of appraisal services. Many agree that this is due to the spike in new home builds. This factor is tied directly to the strength of the economy (new home building starts are a leading economic indicator). I do not know when the bottom will fall out of the appraisal market. However, what goes up must come down. The dot.com boom duped many wise business men and women. Remember when Amazon. Com was valued at \$160/share without any observable profits? Cathy, I believe the appraisal business is at its peak, and must retreat soon. I don't want you to get burned by this.

You have told me that you want to work with adults more frequently and would like to make more money. I have a suggestion that will take care of both the former and the latter. Your sales have doubled in the last year. If this trend continues you will soon have more work than you can handle. If you hire a few employees now, you will never hit the barrier, and you will be working around adults (of your choosing too!) In fact, the doubling of growth is so exciting to me, I would happily donate some of my time to have a part in your company.

The giant step of expanding our, as of yet, small independent business may be daunting to you. You probably are held back by fear of not being able to afford employees. From what you told me, though, most of your expenses have been fixed (painting and manufacturing machines). Because you have mainly fixed costs, your increasing sales should generate direct increased profits. This all but guarantees you will be able to afford your expansion.

WRITING SKILLS ASSESSMENT

Cathy, your passion for this business and the market demand have been demonstrated. Why risk losing this?

Sample Persuasion Paper: Middle (score of 4)

Papers in this category address the writing task with adequate competence, but often with less effective arguments. For example, the writer may simply restate information in the problem rather than display evidence of independent analysis. Although the papers show the writers have adequate command of the skills needed for good writing, the papers have flaws such as needless repetition, awkwardness, or a lack of syntactical variety that keep them out of the top ranges. While adequate, the paper below leans on repetition, assertion, and reiteration of information in the essay question.

In regards to your question of whether to stick with the ornaments or go with the residential real estate appraiser, there are some factors to consider. First, I think you should consider which you like to do more; this is something I cannot decide for you. Looking at pure gross numbers here are some facts. Doing the real estate appraiser generates on average \$10,000 more than the ornament job. The first time you start this job, you have to take that estimated \$10,000 difference and spend it to receive the 75 hour licencing course, business stationary, professional association dues, and cameras. This initial \$10,000 investment is a big sacrifice, but your overall profit for your first year is equal to your ornament job.

Cathy, I think you should take the residential real estate appraiser job. Your kids are in school now, and are not as dependent as they once were. Also, if you think in terms of pure numbers, the appraising job has more profit. Even if you make \$30,000 for your first year in the appraisal business, the next year it will be \$40,000.

I believe that you are ready to work as a residential real estate appraiser. I honestly think you should choose a path you would enjoy. You also said that you missed being around people. You've had three years of experience doing something else and I think you have the knowledge in both careers to know which one you love the most. Like I said before, the money is better working as an appraiser and you would be around people more often.

Cathy, from what you've told me, I think it is best that you work as a residential real estate appraiser. You get to do what you like doing and make more money while you do it. Sure, the days are longer and this job is demanding, but I would love to come work with you. Now, you get to do something that you love, more pay, and you can share the demanding days with your friend.

I know you will choose the path is right for you. Good luck and best wishes on all your endeavors.

Sample Persuasion Paper: Low (score of 2-3)

The score guide describes papers in the 2 or 3 categories as those demonstrating developing competence or some incompetence. These papers may be flawed with such problems as lack of analysis, insufficient development, insufficient or inappropriate support, inappropriate style and tone, or lack of facility with written English. The paper below is representative of essays in this category.

First of all, go with your heart, but sometimes that doesn't give clear cut answers. I guess that is why you have friends. Through the last couple years we've been friends I could always tell that you loved the holiday ornaments. Stick with it. Creativity is a beautiful thing and to be able to work and make money off your own ideas is a huge asset, especially around the holidays with the family.

Your kids will learn to appreciate and love what their mom does instead of working 9-5 everyday. They might be too young to appreciate it now but this is your time to see them grow up even more. Plus I can't wait to see the twins again!

Seriously though, you have to ask yourself; Am I ready to start up again? You left the real estate because it was too demanding but from what you tell me the demands are still there if not greater. You also have to consider that a lot of money has to go into real estate before money comes back trust me I know. Even as an appraisor. You say you miss being around people? People aren't that interesting anyways.

You have a great heart go with what you love. Your family or money? Be there for your husband and your kids, the money will come. They will always remember it. And besides this way I can come up and visit. Say "hi" to the family!

SCORING GUIDE FOR POSITION TASK

General Directions for Scoring: Scores given to papers range from six down to one. Readers should reward what has been done well. Scores should reflect the range in excellence in the papers that have been written on the topic. Because each topic places unique demands on student writers, readers should score papers primarily in reference to the standards that emerge from sample papers for a particular topic. There are, however, some broad categories that define the score ranges, no matter what topic has been administered and no matter how broad or narrow the range of skills of those responding. These categories are listed below.

Score of 6: Outstanding

A paper in this category stands out because it demonstrates clear and consistent competence, although it may have occasional errors. Such a paper exhibits most or all of the following strengths:

- addresses the writing task effectively and insightfully, providing a well-reasoned position that displays critical thinking
- is well organized, with a clear overall strategy
- is fully developed, with pertinent support for ideas presented
- in style and tone is easy and compelling to read and appropriate for a general audience
- displays consistent facility with written English (grammar, syntax, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling)

Score of 5: Strong

A paper in this category demonstrates reasonably consistent competence, although it will have occasional errors or lapses in quality. Such a paper exhibits most or all of the following strengths:

- addresses the writing task effectively, providing a well-reasoned position that may display critical thinking
- is generally well organized
- is generally well developed, using appropriate examples to support ideas
- in style and tone is easy to read and appropriate for a general audience
- displays facility with written English (grammar, syntax, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling)

Score of 4: Adequate

A paper in this category demonstrates adequate competence, although it will have occasional errors and lapses in quality. Such a paper exhibits most or all of the following characteristics:

- addresses the writing task
- is organized and adequately developed
- in style and tone is, for the most part, easy to read and appropriate for a general audience
- displays adequate but inconsistent facility with written English (grammar, syntax, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling)

Score of 3: Limited

A paper in this category demonstrates developing competence. Such a paper either does not

- addresses the writing task effectively or addresses the writing task but exhibits one or more of the following weaknesses:
- is inadequately organized
- is limited in development
- is inconsistent or inappropriate in style and tone for a general audience
- displays limited facility with written English (grammar, syntax, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling)

Score of 2: Flawed

A paper in this category demonstrates some incompetence. Such a paper

- does not address the writing task effectively. In addition, such a paper is flawed by one or more of the following weaknesses:
- has poor organization
- has thin development
- is generally inappropriate in style and tone for a general audience
- displays a lack of facility with written English (grammar, syntax, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling)

Score of 1: Fundamentally Deficient

A paper in this category demonstrates incompetence. Such a paper

- provides little evidence of the ability to address the writing task. In addition, such a paper is flawed by one or more of the following weaknesses:
- has very poor organization
- has very thin development
- is inappropriate in style and tone for a general audience
- contains a pervasive pattern of errors in written English (grammar, syntax, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling) so severe that meaning is obscured

Score of 0: Off topic, Illegible

SAMPLE POSITION TASK AND SAMPLE PAPERS

Sample Position Task

In a recent survey, UW business professors were asked what skills they would seek in students entering the Undergraduate Program. Critical thinking and written and oral communication were high on their list.

Apply critical thinking—that is, thinking characterized by careful analysis and objective evaluation—to one of the two statements below. As soon as you have made your choice, copy the letter “A” or “B” and the first three words of the statement in the “Topic Title” blank on the front of the Position booklet. Then plan and write an essay according to the specific directions following the two statements.

A. The opinion of the majority is not the final proof of what is right.

B. There is no rule without an exception.

Directions: On the statement of your choice, write a unified essay in which you do the following: Explain what you think the statement means. Discuss why you would accept, reject, or alter it. Support your position with reasons and examples from your own experience or observations, current affairs, academic studies or other sources.

There is no “right” or “wrong” answer. Your response will be evaluated on overall quality, including how skillfully and insightfully you support your position and how clearly you organize and express your ideas, following the conventions of standard written English.

Sample Position Paper: High (score of 6)

Although papers in the 6 category differ in approach and have slight differences in quality, they stand out from other papers in a set by their clear and consistent competence in critical thinking, organization, development, and facility with written English. They address the writing task effectively and insightfully, evidenced, for example, by original and relevant strategies, ideas, examples, or expressions. Their writing shows sensitivity to style and tone appropriate for a general (rather than a technical or academic) audience. Papers in this category are not perfect, nor are they expected to be, for each is only a first draft written in the allotted time. The paper below is an example of responses in this category. The author has critically examined the given statement. The essay is well organized, with transitions emerging from the content to move forward the writer’s compellingly argued position.

The statement “the opinion of the majority is not the final proof of what is right” has certainly been true during the course of my life. A story that has often been told in my family provides an excellent example. In the months before my birth, routine medical examinations of my mother began to show a series of concerning abnormalities. While the details have never been made clear to me, the popular opinion of the doctors was that I would be born severely brain damaged. They considered the risk so great that my mother was repeatedly advised that an abortion may be the best choice.

In the midst of clamoring doctors, ill-fated test results, and all the associated emotions of fearing for the health of her unborn son, my mother called her best friend—my godmother. By this point, the birth was imminent and the majority opinion more sure than ever, but my godmother dissented and advised my mother that all would be well. Acting on renewed faith, my mother decided to ignore the popular medical opinion. The rest, as they say, is history.

As you can see, from birth the notion that a majority opinion is not necessarily the final indicator of what is right has resonated strongly with me. Further proof for this belief came some years later. After attending a very small private middle school for three years, I was faced with the decision of where to attend high school. I spoke with my academic advisors, parents, and friends and discovered that the vast majority seemed to be pushing me to continue along the private school route. However, the decision was not as simple for me.

The size of my private school had always bothered me. Though the school officials strove to promote diversity, I felt like I was missing out on possible social interaction. In short, I felt myself becoming increasingly introverted, a fact not aided by the heavy work load of a rigorous private school education.

Remembering my mother’s decision to ignore the majority and act, in part, on faith, I decided to attend the much larger public high school. I will never regret the decision as I feel it was crucial to shaping who I am today and will continue to serve me well in the future.

These are but two of the many examples I could cite in support of the statement given. Certainly the majority should never be ignored. All opinions must be duly considered when making an important choice. However, it has been my experience that a blind reliance on majority opinion may cost you important life lessons, or in my case, life itself.

WRITING SKILLS ASSESSMENT

Sample Position Paper: Middle (score of 4)

Papers in this category address the writing task with adequate competence but with occasional errors and lapses in quality. Although the papers show the writers have adequate command of the skills needed for good writing, the papers have flaws such as needless repetition, instances of awkwardness, a lack of syntactical variety, and minor grammatical errors that keep them out of the top ranges. Papers in this category generally lack the in-depth critical thinking shown in top scoring papers. The paper below is representative of these papers. This essay received its score in part because the writer did a merely adequate job of connecting the example to the essay's overall argument. The essay might have been stronger had it explored the topic beyond a single example, perhaps by discussing the role of the minority, an idea mentioned but not developed.

"Majority rules" is a phrase that is often trite. Our society values the majority opinion because the majority eventually does win, but does that mean that decision is right, and where does the minority stand? When there is an opinion, there lies multiple perspectives. Therefore, "The opinion of the majority is not the final proof of what is right."

For example, drunk driving is a fluctuating problem in our society. The majority of these intoxicated drivers seem to think it's okay for them to drive even if they aren't drunk and only had a few drinks. And when they kill someone in an accident, does that make it right? Absolutely not, but the majority of these drivers express their opinions that they are capable. Sure, these people may have driven home many times intoxicated without harming anyone or anything, but it's only a matter of time before they aren't so lucky.

The problem with the idea that majority rules is that we are deceived to believe that the majority is right. We often are swayed with our opinions, because if so many other people feel that way, then why don't you. It's more challenging to stand out individually as opposed to blending with the crowd. We as individuals still yearn for acceptance, therefore we tend to conform to the majority.

If you were faced with a situation where you had a few drinks, would you drive? You think to yourself, it was only a couple of drinks, and you know you're not drunk. Do you conform to the majority of other intoxicated drivers and convince yourself you're not doing anything wrong? Just because something is common in our society, don't lose sight of your own instincts for you may not always be so lucky.

Sample Position Paper: Low (score of 2-3)

The score guide describes papers in this category as demonstrating limited competence or some incompetence. These papers are generally not well developed and are flawed by such problems as failure to address the writing task appropriately, poor organization, insufficient or inappropriate support, inappropriate style and tone, or lack of facility with written English. The essay below is representative of papers in this category. Beyond displaying flaws in writing skills, the essay does not directly address the writing task.

The opinion of the majority is not the final proof of what is right.

I accept this statement. Each person has a different opinion about a story, a joke, or a poem. Essentially no one has the same opinion. Opinions never wrong or right. You are the one who can decide whether the opinion is strong or not. For instance, if you are a boss of a company, what do you do to perform others to work well in your company. You have to listen to their opinions, but sometimes you have to share your opinion with them. You may accept their opinions or you may not accept their opinions. The final decision may decide by you or your employees. Opinion is a key strategy to the future success to your firm. This exercise is to identify your key employees and create a development plan for them. Moreover, you need to make a shift and learn how to support them by sharing the majority opinions, but the opinion of the majority is not the final proof of what is right. You must understand that successful companies don't limit development to their key employees, and use opinion as a tool to recruiting and retaining the best employees in all categories. So opinion should be share with each other and feel free to have your opinion all the time. You should remember that opinion never right or wrong.

The University of Washington School of Business Administration gratefully acknowledges precedents set by Educational Testing Services, Princeton, N.J., in scoring standards for tests of writing ability.

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