Understanding The WPA

Abilities Tested

The Writing Proficiency Assessment (WPA) is a writing task that should be familiar to all college students. Instead of responding to a general question that asks you to write about personal experiences that you may or may not have experienced, you will be asked to analyze a short reading selection and write a coherent argument analysis of a short reading.

The WPA tests not only reading comprehension, but the ability to analyze and think critically about a text, which is demonstrated through clear, precise writing.

Basic Skills Necessary

Evaluators score essays on the writer's ability to analyze a written argument; to develop and organize ideas; to support these ideas with evidence or specific examples; to understand your essay's intended audience (i.e. faculty from a variety of disciplines); to employ language skillfully; and to demonstrate appropriate paragraphing, sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

General Tips

1. Visit the WPA and Test Office web pages. Familiarize yourself with the requirements, scoring criteria, sample reading, and the prompt. WPA web page: http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/~gwar/ and the Test Office web page: http://www.sa.sdsu.edu/testofc

2. Read the prompt carefully (at least twice — more times if necessary) before reading and writing. Circle key words. This will help you focus on the assigned task.

3. Read the Reading Selection before writing. Employ reading strategies that include underlining, circling, or (better still) annotating parts of the reading that contain information that you may need to use in your written response. This may also save you time from rereading for a passage you can remember but cannot quickly find again.

4. Use a form of prewriting to brainstorm. If activities such as mapping/clustering, listing, or outlining help you get started and organize your thoughts, then, use prewriting strategies.

5. Organize the time allotted for the writing task. A poorly written essay can be the result of inadequate planning or inefficient use of the time allotted. You have 90 minutes to read a short argument and write an analytical response — so manage your time.

6. Do not let mechanics slow down your writing. Keep the flow of your writing going; then come back later to correct minor grammar, punctuation, and spelling errors.

7. Allow time to read and edit your paper. You will not have time to make extensive revisions, but you should leave enough time to make minor ones to clarify a point, add evidence or further explanation, add more to a part that is slighted or missing, and/or conclude your essay. As you read, make sure that you also correct minor flaws such as grammar, punctuation, and spelling error.

8. Using quotes. Keep them short, explain, and use quote marks at the “beginning and end.”

9. Write legibly: Use your normal size handwriting and the margins in the booklet. Faint or irregular handwriting is difficult to read.

Preparing For the WPA

Here are a few ideas to help you prepare for taking the WPA:

• Find short editorials (10-12 column inches) from a local newspaper or news magazine.
• Set a 90 minute time limit to read the article and write an analysis using the prompt on the other side of this handout.
• Read and evaluate your own essay using the scoring criteria from the Test Office web page.
• Better still — get together with a group of classmates, read and write about the same article, exchange papers, evaluate each other’s papers, and have a discussion.
• Repeat these steps until you master the essential skills.
The WPA Prompt

The following essay prompt will be used for each WPA offered this semester.

Essay Prompt

Craft a coherent essay (i.e., one that is not just a series of paragraph responses to the prompt) in which you respond (in an appropriate order) to all of the following components.

Identify and provide a brief explanation of the author’s argument; Describe and discuss two strategies that the author uses to support his or her argument; Describe the overall structure of the reading selection and explain whether it furthers the aims of the author’s argument; Discuss the premise(s) and/or assumption(s) on which the argument is based; Evaluate the extent to which you find the argument convincing.

Caution: This essay is not an “agree or disagree” exercise, nor is it intended to generate extensive summary of the article. Responses that emphasize personal opinion or summary will not earn a passing score.

Important Terms

Pay close attention to how the writing prompt is phrased. It is very important to focus on the exact assigned task and address all parts of the writing prompt. If you address what you are being asked, you increase your chances of earning a better score.

Here are some terms to look for along with brief definitions:

Brief Explanation: Requires you to put the author’s argument in your own words. You want to keep this as brief as possible by limiting this discussion to only 1 paragraph.

Describe, Explain, Discuss: Moving beyond summary, these terms require you to analyze, to go beyond what is written to how it is written. Effective description, explanation, and discussion are objective and impersonal, rather than subjective. Furthermore, they employ specific, direct, concrete language.

Evaluate: More subjective than objective analysis, evaluation requires judgment and assessment based on explicit criteria, reasoning, and evidence. Evaluating an argument goes beyond declaring whether or not you agree with it. You are required to assess how its strengths and weaknesses contribute to or undermine its convincingness. Attention to the writer’s efforts to respond to potential opposition is particularly important.

Strategies: Strategies are moves or devices that help build and support arguments. Commonly used strategies include examples, statistical support, appeals to the emotions of the reader (pathos), demonstrations of authorial credibility (ethos), analogies and comparisons, irony, refutations of opposing arguments, and quotations from experts and famous sources. Stylistic devices such as repetition, alliteration, and metaphor can also be characterized as strategies.

Structure: The way a piece of writing develops and unfolds over time.

Premise and Assumption: Treated as synonyms in this assignment, premises and assumptions are the principles, propositions, beliefs, and values upon which arguments or parts of arguments rest. Premises and assumptions can be explicitly stated or implicit (merely implied or suggested) in an argument. They are effective to the extent they come to be shared by the reader and writer, thus forming “common ground.”

Typical Evaluator Comments on Essays

Essays that score an 8 are competent, yet:

• slight and/or fail to address all parts of the prompt;
• slight analysis too much by summarizing;
• slight support of main ideas and lack specific support by generalizing; and
• slight meaning through organization and structure that are too formulaic or perfunctory.

Essays that score a 6 are inadequate, and:

• neglect to address key elements of the prompt through excessive summary, agree or disagree focus, or too much personal opinion;
• neglect development and support of main ideas through the use of specifics;
• neglect good organization and structure, unity, and coherence that further meaning; and
• neglect correct grammar and us