

Written Proficiency Assessments

Students preparing for the work world or for applications to professional or graduate-level studies are often required to write tests that are designed, either in whole or in part, to **evaluate their abilities as writers**. Examples of such tests include the **Medical College Admission Test (MCAT)**, the **Law School Admission Test (LSAT)**, and language tests like **IELTS (International English Language Testing System)** and **TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language)**. The written component of these tests asks students to consider an assigned topic and then write a short essay for evaluation. While the questions used in these tests are phrased in such a way that “**there is no wrong answer**”, the **structure of the essay** itself is quite conventional.

The Questions

The essay questions on tests of writing proficiency are intended to be contentious, but not controversial. They are designed to elicit a **strong opinion** from the writer on reasonably mundane debates, such as whether children should be taught to be competitive or cooperative, or whether or not it is possible for journalists to be objective. The expectation with any of these questions, however, is that the student should have an immediate response that forms the basis of the subsequent essay’s structure.

The Structure

In answering these test questions, students should follow a conventional template that includes **three paragraphs**. Each paragraph will have, as its focus, one of the following perspectives on the issue:

1. **Thesis: Side A of the topic.** For example, if the question asks if teenagers should work part time or focus on their studies, Side A would argue that teenagers should work part time.

2. **Antithesis: Side B of the topic.** Following the above example, Side B would argue that teenagers should focus on their studies.

3. **Synthesis:** This paragraph fuses the two sides of the issue together, acknowledges that they both have their merits, but favors one side over the other. Following the above example, the synthesis would agree that teenagers who focus on their studies may be better prepared for the rigors of university, but that ultimately they will be less capable of handling the transition to living independently without work experience.

When composing the essay, students may choose to begin by discussing the side of the issue with which they do not agree, or alternatively they may decide to begin with the side that they favor. In either case, the **synthesis paragraph should come last**.

The Analysis

When discussing both Side A and Side B, students must present **evidence** that supports the argument of that paragraph. As part of the general evaluation of these kinds of written tests, markers expect that the evidence presented will be **anecdotal** or taken directly from **life experience**, and so there is **no need to provide citations**.

Example A: “Teenagers need to develop a sense of responsibility before leaving home for university by working part time while still in high school. Extra time on the job may make life a little busier, but as the saying goes, ‘Adversity builds character’.”

Example B: “Prospective university students should focus on their studies in high school if they hope to succeed at the next level. On a personal note, I spent most of my free time during high school reading ahead, and I still struggled in my first year of university.”

Ensure that each side of the discussion has at least **one point of evidence** of the variety provided above, and then summarize the point of that paragraph as it relates to the general topic.

Flow

Students can help the evaluators follow the threads of their arguments by including **transitional words or phrases** that connect the different ideas or sides of the argument in the essays. The basic level of transition in this case would include a contrasting word or phrase (**however, on the other hand, nevertheless**) at the beginning of the **second paragraph** and a concluding or summarizing word or phrase (**ultimately, on the whole**) at the beginning of the **final paragraph**.

Attention to Detail

Even when students closely follow all of the advice provided above, they might still perform poorly on a test of written proficiency if they do not take the time to carefully **proofread their work** and ensure that it is completely error free.

1. Check for spelling errors and mistakes in grammar and punctuation.
2. Make sure that the handwriting is legible.
3. Simplify the sentence structure to avoid awkward phrasing.