

PART ONE

The Essay Subtest

The essay is the first subtest you will take. You will be given an answer folder with blank sheets of lined paper and a test booklet with directions and a choice of two topics that calls for a short explanatory or persuasive essay. Because the topics are general, you must narrow the one you choose to a more specific topic that you can deal with successfully in the hour that you will have to write.

Successful essays written for the CLAST span a wide variety of styles and formats. Some students write very formal informative essays drawing on knowledge from their majors, while others write humorous pieces about their families or friends. Some write in the first person; others in the third. One writer may present a clear three-part thesis at the end of an introductory paragraph; another may move inductively to a strong conclusion. In short, no single format is required for the test. However, every successful essay demonstrates control of the essay form and of standard written English. The following information suggests one way of preparing for a timed essay test that will be judged on purpose, organization, development, and mechanics.

THE TEN-FORTY-TEN RULE

You can use your time most efficiently if you budget your time. Divide the hour for writing the essay in the following way.

FIRST 10 MINUTES

Narrow the subject and generate ideas.
– Brainstorm, list, cluster, ask questions
Write a thesis.
Write a rough outline of the major units for development.

NEXT 40 MINUTES

Write the essay.
– Write an introductory paragraph.
– Write two or more body paragraphs with specifics, examples, and transitions.
– Write a concluding paragraph.

LAST 10 MINUTES

Check and proofread.
– Polish sentences.
– Check transitions.
– Check grammar.
– Check spelling.
– Check punctuation.
– Check for omitted words or letters.
– Cross out errors.

It is wise to break down the sixty-minute period into ten minutes for generating ideas, forty minutes for actual writing, and ten minutes for checking or revising your work. Remembering the ten-forty-ten rule will help keep you calm and organized when the test begins.

NARROWING THE SUBJECT AND GENERATING IDEAS (1a–d) (10 minutes)

One secret of writing success is to develop an idea with details and examples, so select your topic and narrow it to *something you know about*, something from your own knowledge and experience. For example, if the topic requires you to explain why some natural feature or ecological community should be protected, don't write about something as broad as saving all the forests in Florida. Instead, write about saving something in nature that you have experienced, possibly an old live oak tree down the street, hung with Spanish moss and bird nests, where your family picnics. Then you

can describe specifically the tree's grace and dignity as well as discuss its place in the natural world, thus creating a vivid picture in the readers' minds.

Read through the following list of possible essay topics and practice narrowing them to a subject you could develop with specific details and examples.

A natural feature or ecological community that should be protected from pollution, development, or other type of destruction

A trend or social change that has affected family relationships or responsibilities

Consumer purchases that reflect modern lifestyles

An individual who has demonstrated great courage, intelligence, or leadership

Adjustments that students must make to survive in college

A discovery or invention that has changed the home or workplace

As you begin to narrow the topic, briefly brainstorm to generate as many ideas as possible. See 1b in *The Bedford Handbook* for suggestions about the techniques of listing, clustering, and asking questions. Use whichever technique suits your topic and your writing style. Your test booklet has blank pages that you can use for these preliminary activities; the pages will be discarded later and will not be considered in your score.

By using the ten-minute planning time instead of plunging right into writing the essay, you will force yourself to focus more clearly and reach for the *best* reasons, facts, examples, or other details to support and develop your main point. This brainstorming process will also help “prime the pump” if you first draw a blank.

As you brainstorm, focus on the wording of the topic, asking yourself specific questions about it. The following example shows how you might do this.

TOPIC: A trend or social change that has affected family relationships or responsibilities

QUESTIONS: *Who* are these families?

Where do they live?

What is one change they face today?

When did this change begin?

Why has this change come about?

How do families cope with this change?

WRITING THE THESIS AND A ROUGH OUTLINE (1c–d, 2a)

As you narrow the topic and generate ideas, you need to focus on the main point you want to explain or prove. Write out a sentence that expresses this central point. That sentence is your thesis. If you have trouble formulating the sentence, try letting the wording of the topic in the test booklet help you. Underline the key terms and then review your list of ideas or your questions again. Suppose, for example, you chose the following topic.

TOPIC: Consumer purchases that reflect modern lifestyles

After thinking carefully about the topic and your questions, you might come up with something like this:

THESIS: Selecting *purchases* from the hardware aisle to the deli and frozen food aisles of our Winn-Dixie reflects the in-a-hurry *lifestyle* of the modern consumer.

As this example shows, you can create your thesis sentence using the actual words from the topic (the words that are italicized) and then go back later and revise the sentence with more interesting words and a more precise focus.

Once you have a working thesis sentence and have generated a few specific ideas about it, jot down a rough outline. The outline has two purposes: to help you visualize how your essay will look when it is completed and to guide you as you write the paragraphs in the body of the essay. The example thesis predicts a five-paragraph essay consisting of an introduction; three body paragraphs using examples of the hardware, deli, and frozen food aisles; and a conclusion. (The test evaluators will be looking for four to six paragraphs: introductory and concluding paragraphs and two to four well-developed body paragraphs.) A formal outline with roman numerals is *not* required. Just make sure to include the main topic of each paragraph and the best examples you have thought of so far. Others may come to you as you write.

WRITING THE DRAFT (2a–c): 40 minutes

Now that you have a good idea of your main point and a plan of organization, you should shift to the blank pages in your answer booklet and begin. Use ink and do not try to write more than one draft. Leave margins on both sides of your essay so that you will have room for making changes and additions.

The Introductory Paragraph (2a)

When you begin the introductory paragraph, think of a “hook” that will call your reader’s attention to your essay. Although you should be writing for a general audience, remember that your readers are English teachers, evaluators who may read 300 to 800 CLAST essays on the same topic during the weekend that they read yours, so sparking their attention is vital. To grab their attention, you might begin with a striking statistic, fact, or example, or you might use a vivid image, anecdote, quotation, or question. After the opening sentence, write two or three sentences explaining or reacting to the opener that will lead the reader naturally to your thesis sentence, which contains the point you will explain, illustrate, or prove in the body paragraphs.

The Body Paragraphs (4a–f)

After you have written the introductory paragraph, look back at your rough outline and *briefly* consider whether the order of your ideas still makes sense. In the supermarket example, it might seem most natural to go from hardware to deli to frozen foods, as the usual flow of traffic does in your store. In another essay you might arrange your ideas from least to most important so that you can build your case to a climax.

However you arrange the order of your paragraphs, remember that you must *develop your ideas with specifics*: examples, reasons, facts, statistics, references to

authorities, and descriptive details that appeal to the five senses. Do not be afraid to speak from personal experience; examples from your own life may help you express yourself most powerfully. Also don't avoid proper names: "Sara Lee cherry cheesecake" speaks more loudly than "frozen dessert" does.

Once you have written the specifics in paragraphs, check the beginning of each paragraph to see whether you have a *topic sentence* that announces the main idea of the paragraph. For example, suppose you have written a paragraph that examines the possible purchases found in the frozen food aisle. You might try a sentence like this one:

TOPIC SENTENCE: After leaving the deli counter, the busy customer turns up the last aisle and sees the foggy glass doors of the frozen food section, which is loaded with convenience entrées.

Not only does this sentence announce the new topic to be developed, it establishes a connection with the topic of the previous paragraph with the *transitional phrase* "After leaving the deli counter." Such transitions provide smooth connections between ideas. Before you write your practice essay in Part Three, review the list of transitional expressions in Section 47F of *The Bedford Handbook*.

The Concluding Paragraph (2c)

Your conclusion can be brief, but it must convey a sense of an ending by summarizing your main points or circling back to the beginning. You can accomplish this by merely rephrasing the thesis, but if you have time, adapt one of the techniques for an opening sentence (see page 7) or write a conclusion based on your own introduction. For example, if you asked a question as an opener, you might give a simple, assertive answer to that question. You could end with a succinct quotation, a witty quotation, or a brief anecdote. Or you might offer a prediction for the future or suggest an application or a course of action.

Finally, quickly think of a title that captures the essence of your essay and provokes interest in it. The title "A Supermarket Society" might work for the essay about consumer purchases and modern lifestyles. An appropriate title adds to the positive overall impression that the evaluators will get as they begin to read your essay.

EDITING AND PROOFREADING (All handbook sections): 10 minutes

If you have budgeted your time according to the ten-forty-ten rule, you have ten minutes left to carefully read, revise, and correct what you have written. Check your transitional words and phrases; add interesting, descriptive adjectives; combine choppy sentences with subordinate clauses and phrases. In short, look for any way you might clarify your meaning, signal the connections between your ideas, and make your writing come alive for your readers.

When you are satisfied with those large elements of your essay, look for errors in sentence structure, subject-verb agreement, pronoun use, and word choice. These are the most common errors made on CLAST essays. Finally, check for errors in spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. Cross out any errors you spot and write the corrections above them. Do not hesitate to cross out or add to your draft.

The Bedford Handbook will help you learn to identify and correct different kinds of writing problems. In addition, working through Part Two in this booklet will give you practice in sharpening the skills you can use to edit and proofread your essay.

SCORING THE ESSAY

Your CLAST essay will be scored by two evaluators, probably college English instructors, who will read it quickly but carefully to gain an impression of the essay as a whole. Rather than looking for specific errors, they will assess the overall writing quality. Each reader will independently assign the essay a score from 1 to 6, and the two scores will be added together. Presently, the passing score for the CLAST essay is 6; that means that each reader has given it at least a score of 3. The present criteria that the Florida Department of Education uses for each score are as follows.

SCORE OF 6: The essay presents or implies a thesis that is developed with noticeable coherence. The writer's ideas are usually substantive, sophisticated, and carefully elaborated. The writer's choice of language and structure is precise and purposeful, often to the point of being polished. Control of sentence structure, usage, and mechanics, despite an occasional flaw, contributes to the writer's ability to communicate the essay's purpose.

SCORE OF 5: The essay presents or implies a thesis and provides convincing, specific support. The writer's ideas are usually fresh, mature, and extensively developed. The writer demonstrates a command of language and uses a variety of structures. Control of sentence structure, usage, and mechanics, despite an occasional flaw, contributes to the writer's ability to communicate the essay's purpose.

SCORE OF 4: The essay presents a thesis and often suggests a plan of development, which is usually carried out. The writer provides enough supporting detail to accomplish the essay's purpose. The writer makes competent use of language and sometimes varies the sentence structure. Occasional errors in sentence structure, usage, and mechanics do not interfere with the writer's ability to communicate the essay's purpose.

SCORE OF 3: The essay presents a thesis and often suggests a plan of development, which is usually carried out. The writer provides support that tends toward generalized statements or a listing. In general, the support is neither sufficient nor clear enough to be convincing. Sentence structure tends to be pedestrian and often repetitious. Errors in sentence structure, usage, and mechanics sometimes interfere with the writer's ability to communicate the essay's purpose.

SCORE OF 2: The essay usually presents a thesis. The writer provides support that tends to be sketchy or illogical. Sentence structure may be simplistic and disjointed. Errors in sentence structure, usage, and mechanics frequently interfere with the writer's ability to communicate the essay's purpose.

SCORE OF 1: The essay generally presents a thesis that is vaguely worded or weakly asserted. Support, if any, tends to be rambling and/or superficial. The writer uses language that often becomes tangled, incoherent, and thus confusing. Errors in sentence structure, usage, and mechanics are frequent.

Practice Scoring

Now that you have some information about how the CLAST essay is evaluated and have seen the criteria that the Florida Department of Education uses to score the essays, you can practice applying the descriptions to some examples.

The following eight writing samples are the opening paragraphs taken from CLAST-type essays written by students. The students were assigned the topic “A product that should be taken off the market.” Although these are not complete essays, try your hand at evaluating the samples, placing your predicted score in the blank provided. The discussion that follows the samples explains each evaluation assigned by a college instructor.

Why Throw Rocks at Glass Houses?

- A. _____ What if we all lived in a glass house that protected us from deadly elements? You would not find anyone throwing rocks or sharp objects at that essential shield. In a sense, all organisms live protected from the sun’s harmful rays in such a glass house, a thin layer of the atmosphere called the ozone layer, but contrary to logical assumptions, “rocks” are constantly being thrown at that shield. These rocks are called chlorofluorocarbons (CFC’s) and halons, which are found in aerosol hair sprays, VHS cleaners, fog horns and old halon fire extinguishers. Dangerous products like these should be taken off the market.

Products of Today

- B. _____ In our world of today with it’s fast paste and convenient life style, we have become obsessed with the here and now. It is with this attitude of a “disposable society” that we do not think of the danger and problems we cause today which we might not be able to solve tomorrow. People should become aware of these problems and dangers of today and strive for the solutions for tomorrow. It is this reason why people should avoid products that pollute or distroy our enviroment. There are several major types of products that need to be removed from the market.

A Look behind the Smoke Screen

- C. _____ There is a product that should be taken off the market, but unfortunately, do to such high demand, probably never will be. This product is cigarettes. The addictive power of the nicotine contained in cigarettes is enough to keep these cancer causing agents in business. Smokers seem to ignore the facts that smoking cigarettes is a health hazard, an inconvenience, and an unnecessary expense.

The Banning of Radar Detectors

- D. _____ It was around 10:30 pm on a Wednesday night, I was riding with a friend on the way home from a movie we had just seen. There were not many people on the road so we began to speed. My friend had his radar

detector on so we felt safe. After a couple of minutes his radar detector went off and before we would slow down we were “snagged.” My friend was furious. “Two hundred bucks, wasted!” he mumbled for days. The detector was not only expensive, but it gave us a false sense of security. I feel that radar detectors should be taken off the market. Three reasons for this are the obtainability, the unreliability and mainly the promotion of speeding.

Killing Me

- E.** _____ There is an increasing number of deaths in the U.S. and they are due to the selling of hand guns in almost every department store. Everyday someone comes in contact with a lethal weapon usually its a small child. The availability of so many guns and pistols is unnecessary. You don't hunt with hand guns and machine guns. Guns should be taken off the shelves and put into special armories. 1. They are dangerous, 2. it leads people to believe they are the police force, killing many innocent people. 3. And, the owners are not properly educated to use guns. I will further explain these three in more detail.

Diet Pills Are Unhealthy

- F.** _____ Many people believe that diet pills are a simple and easy way to lose weight. This is not true. Diet pills are not helpful and should be removed from the market. Some problems with diet pills are: gaining more weight, health problems, or emotional problems.

Should It Stay or Fade Away?

- G.** _____ In today's world, producers are trying to create products which are safe and more advanced for consumers and for the world in which they live. When making products, health risks and hazards to both adults and children are also being kept in mind. Today, much research is being done to see both the positive and negative effects of new products, yet many years ago, when this research was not required, the producers of bleach thought they had invented such a wonderful product that they did not take a look at the many hazardous factors. Chlorine bleach should be taken off today's market because it is dangerous to human health, it is already dying in a large cleaning product market, and it can do permanent damage/fading to clothing and fabrics.

Deadly Toys

- H.** _____ Heightened public awareness, conscientious consumer groups, and stricter government regulations and supervision have led to fairly strict testing and examination of products and toys intended for use by children. No longer must the consumer worry about a child's head getting stuck in the bars of a baby bed or about the eyes of a favorite doll easily popping out and accidentally becoming lodged in a child's throat. However, sometimes a product's danger cannot be determined until that product is on the market. Realistic looking toy weapons are an example. Realistic toy weapons need to be removed from the market because of the dangers they can cause both children and adults if they are mistaken for real weapons.

Now check your evaluations with ours.

A. *Why Throw Rocks at Glass Houses?*

SCORE: 6

This essay seems to be going in the direction of a solid 6 because the writer has a firm grasp of the topic, seems well informed, and uses good, specific examples. An interesting opener engages the attention of the reader and leads to a substantive thesis. The sentences have variety, and transitions tie the ideas together coherently. The writer demonstrates good control of language and structure.

B. *Products of Today*

SCORE: 2

This one might be called a 2 essay so far. Although this opening paragraph is fairly long, it says little because of the vague wording and repetition. No specific types of products are mentioned, so the reader does not know where the essay is headed. It cannot possibly cover all types in such a short time and short space. Simple sentence structures and errors of usage and spelling further weaken the impression a reader gets. In the body of the essay, the writer would have to provide solid examples in a logical order to have any hope of a higher score.

C. *A Look behind the Smoke Screen*

SCORE: 4

Although the title evokes immediate interest, this essay could wind up scoring either as a low 4 or a high 3, depending on the quality of the specifics and sentence structure in the body paragraphs. It contains a distracting usage error (*do* for *due*) and too many *be* verb forms (*is*) rather than action verbs. A delaying device, *There is*, slows down the impact of a possibly powerful opening sentence. However, the writer does state a focused and emphatic thesis that predicts the organization of the essay. Since most people would consider “health hazards” to be more serious than “unnecessary expense,” the writer should consider leading up to health hazards as the most persuasive reason for taking cigarettes off the market, rather than burying it in the middle of the essay.

D. *The Banning of Radar Detectors*

SCORE: 3

This essay might be a low 3. The example used in the opener evokes interest and demonstrates the problem to be discussed, and the slang is appropriate as it captures the flavor of the individual in the example and is not used except for that description. The paragraph makes a good effort at a thesis, though it seems to wobble somewhat, and the last two sentences could be compressed into one, more effective thesis statement. The idea of “obtainability” does not seem a balanced parallel to the other two reasons and may not develop into a full body paragraph. In fact, this paragraph suggests that the writer may be unable to come up with enough specifics to develop the body well. In addition, weak sentence structures, comma splices, and other comma errors weaken the overall impression. This essay could slip to a 2 if more awkward sentences and few specifics appear in the body paragraphs.

E. *Killing Me*

SCORE: 1

While this opening paragraph demonstrates thought and concern, and while a reader can see how three body paragraphs might evolve from it, it has distracting errors in sentence structure, pronoun agreement, and pronoun reference. The thesis is not coherently stated, and the last sentence is unnecessary. Possibly the body would use

strong, specific examples, but with continued errors and incoherence, a reader is unlikely to pull the essay to a 2 or 3 score.

F. *Diet Pills Are Unhealthy* **SCORE: 3**

This essay sounds like a very low 3, as it begins with an opener that is both weak and abrupt. This, along with the simplistic, choppy sentence structure, gives the impression that the writer does not have control over the writing process. The thesis is apparent but does not narrow and focus the topic. *Health problems* and *emotional problems* are broad and vague. Unless the writer provides some strong, specific examples in the body, the essay may sink to a 2.

G. *Should It Stay or Fade Away?* **SCORE: 4**

This is a good 4 essay. The development leads from general to specific effectively, and reasonable sentence variety demonstrates that this writer has control of the subject and of the essay form. The coherently stated thesis predicts a clear outline of the body paragraphs to follow, although human health hazards should be considered more important than damage to fabrics, so the thesis and essay would be more effective if the health hazards came last. The dangling modifier in the second sentence is distracting, but other errors are minimal.

H. *Deadly Toys* **SCORE: 5**

This essay, which scores a 5, narrows the topic well, presents a strong thesis, and provides examples that serve as good background information. The essay suggests a plan of development and states a clear position. The writer might have created even more reader interest by providing examples of injury or death involving these “deadly toys.” Although the paragraph is a bit wordy, there are no serious errors that distract from the overall purpose.

Obviously, a clear score cannot be determined from only the first paragraph. When your own essay is scored, your readers will carefully read the entire essay before arriving at a score since some essays earn a higher score because of an effective conclusion or an insightful body paragraph.

Clearly focused, carefully structured, well-developed essays that demonstrate a graceful use of language will always be the touchstone for judging the best — the goal to strive for.

As you write the practice essay in Part III or write an essay based on some of the topics suggested earlier in Part I, use the scoring criteria to help you examine your own strengths and weaknesses. Using the criteria will help you be more objective and analytical about your writing, thus helping you write and revise your own essay on the CLAST test.

SUMMARY

As your skills sharpen, you will become more aware of when an essay does or does not have a clear thesis, purpose, and organizational plan expressed in the introduction. You will become more sensitive to the body paragraphs, seeing whether they are well developed with specific, relevant details expressed in a variety of sentence patterns. You will be able to detect whether your essay uses logical transitions, effective word choice, and correct, standard American English.