

**PREPARATION GUIDELINES FOR THE  
ENGLISH PROFICIENCY EXAMINATION (EPE)**

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## **THE ENGLISH PROFICIENCY EXAMINATION**

The English Proficiency Examination (EPE) in Expository Writing was established as a diagnostic and teaching vehicle for implementing the Board of Trustees' mandate that all students in the Graduate School demonstrate proficiency in academic writing as a prerequisite for admission to candidacy for the master's or doctoral degree. All graduate students, unless exempt, are required to take the EPE in the beginning of the graduate program. Students who score at least a 5 on the 6-point holistic rubric will receive a certificate of competence; those who score a 4 (adequate response) must schedule an appointment with a writing instructor of the Program for Academic Support Services (PASS); those who score below a 4 must enroll in and successfully complete a set of writing courses and/or workshops/tutorials offered by the PASS. Students may only be exempt from the EPE if they have scores of 5 and above on the GRE Analytical Writing Assessment. These students are required to submit official documentation of their scores to the PASS program assistant in order to receive a certificate of competence.

The examination is given during the fall (August), spring (January), and first summer session (May) of each academic year. The EPE consists of a 500-word essay written in a two-three hour period on a topic chosen by the student from a list provided by PASS. The essay is evaluated by the use of a 6-point rubric (see page 13).

### **DEFINITION OF WRITING TERMS**

**THESIS:** A thesis presents the stand that a writer takes, the ideas or points that the essay will develop, and, at times, the order in which the essay will be developed. A thesis statement is a declarative sentence that is written in the third person. The thesis is usually placed at the end of the introductory paragraph.

**TOPIC SENTENCE:** The topic sentence controls the paragraph in which it appears; it may be placed at the beginning, middle, or end of the paragraph.

**TRANSITIONS:** Transitions may be words, phrases, or clauses that are used to connect the ideas in the essay. Transitions used appropriately aid the smoothness of the development.

**PARAGRAPHS:** Paragraphs are units of the essay that provide the support or justification for the thought in the thesis. They are developed around each subdivision of the thesis idea expressed in the topic sentences. Paragraphs may be developed by using an extended example, a series of illustrations, and/or other specific details.

**CONCLUSION:** The concluding paragraph brings the discussion to a satisfying end.

## CONSTRUCTING A THESIS

Before constructing a thesis statement, be sure that the topic you select is specific. Examine the following movement:

<u>General</u>	<u>Limited</u>	<u>Specific</u>
Death	Fatal Disease Capital Punishment Capital Punishment	Coping with Cancer Capital Punishment as a Deterrent to Crime Capital Punishment as a Deterrent To Crime
Life	Life in the Twenty-First Century	Preparing for Life in the Twenty-First Century

### Theses:

Since capital punishment has not always acted as a deterrent to crime, its practice should be reconsidered.

In preparing for the twenty-first century, students today should become literate in the use of the computer, proficient in communication skills, and receptive to a culturally diverse society.

There are essentially four kinds of statements: facts, personal value judgments or opinions, self-evident statements, and stands on issues. **Stands on issues make usable theses.**

### Facts:

The boiling of water at sea level is 212 degrees Fahrenheit.

Egbert Freihof's study shows that winos constitute only 19 percent of this country's alcoholics.

**A statement of fact, therefore, is not a thesis because it does not invite argumentation.**

### Value Judgments:

I like dogs better than cats.

People who believe that capital punishment should be abolished are naive.

**A statement of mere judgment or opinion, therefore, is not a thesis because personal preference need not be debatable.**

### Self-Evident Statements:

Shakespeare's great tragedies are worth reading.

Advertising is a medium of persuasion.

**Self-evident statements, like fact statements, do not invite argumentation.**

### THESIS STATEMENTS: EXERCISE FOR REVIEW

Read the following sentences and consider why each is effective or ineffective as a thesis sentence for a short paper. Rewrite the ineffective sentences to make them effective as thesis sentences:

1. My paper will discuss the advantages of an urban college.
2. Hartford, Connecticut, is a nice place in which to live.
3. Toni Morrison's Beloved is an interesting book.
4. There are many tourist attractions in this city.
5. Many foreigners who move to this country face significant adjustment problems.
6. Dr. Richardson should be considered for the humanitarian award because of her work with Operation Smile, her establishment of a school of the blind in Liberia, and her work with the Teen Pregnancy Task Force.

#### Consider the following responses to items in the exercise:

1. Ineffective: The word advantages is too general and the phrase my paper will discuss is unnecessary. There is no need to announce the purpose of the paper.  
Effective: The advantages of an urban college include convenient and inexpensive access to transportation as well as a wide variety of recreational choices.
2. Ineffective: The word nice is a vague value judgment.  
Effective: Because of its small-town atmosphere as well as its urban development, Hartford, Connecticut, has become a more attractive city in which to live.
3. Ineffective: The word interesting is vague.  
Effective: Toni Morrison's novel Beloved helps convey the overall devastation of African-Americans in slavery.
4. Ineffective: An observed fact is stated.  
Effective: Tourist attractions in Washington, D.C., not only include common sites such as the Washington Monument and the White House, but also less frequented sites such as the Frederick Douglas Home and The Anacostia Museum.
5. Ineffective: An observed fact is stated.  
Effective: Many Foreigners who move to his country face significant adjustment problems involving language as well as customs.
6. Effective: Specific reasons are offered.

Exercise and responses are adapted from the following:

Jarrett, Joyce M., Margaret Giles Lee, and Doreatha D. Mbalia. Pathways: A Text for Developing Writers. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1990.

## **WRITING A FORMAL ESSAY**

A formal essay has three parts: 1) the beginning (introduction); 2) the middle (body); and 3) the ending (conclusion). Below is a synopsis of the structure of a formal essay:

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

For a 500-word essay, generally, the introduction is no more than one paragraph. It presents the thesis statement and convinces the reader of the importance of the central idea. It also provides a frame of reference for the thesis. This first paragraph establishes the focus of the essay by suggesting appropriate developmental strategies, such as analysis (process, cause and effect, and classification), definition, comparison/contrast, and exemplification. Usually, but not always, the thesis statement is the last sentence of the paragraph.

### **II. DEVELOPMENTAL PARAGRAPHS**

For a 500-word essay, there should be 2-4 developmental paragraphs. Each developmental paragraph presents a topic sentence that clearly states the respective ideas that are suggested by the thesis statement in the introductory paragraph. Supporting sentences in each developmental paragraph provide explanation through details, examples, and relevant discussion. The final sentence in each developmental paragraph concludes the argument introduced in the topic sentence and supported in the text of the paragraph.

### **III. CONCLUSION**

The concluding paragraph summarizes and assesses the main points of the essay. The central ideas of the essay as a whole should be restated and key words and phrases from the body of the essay may be repeated. No new ideas are explored or suggested. The concluding sentence of the paragraph may stand as a general restatement of the thesis of the entire paper.

The writing process includes three stages: 1) planning; 2) writing or drafting; and, 3) proofreading and revising.

### **1. Planning**

- A. Select a topic and then, using scratch paper, jot down related ideas that come to mind.
- B. Based on the ideas that you have listed, decide on the major point or the purpose that your essay will communicate; the purpose will suggest the developmental strategy: cause and effect, process analysis, comparison/contrast, or some other.
- C. Formulate a thesis statement and develop a working outline that contains concrete ideas that will develop the stated thesis; that is, the plan or outline should reflect at least three levels of movement from the general to the specific: thesis statement, topic sentences, specific details.

### **2. Writing**

- A. Write an introductory paragraph that presents the context for the development of the thesis and also presents the thesis statement and the organizational pattern for the development of ideas suggested by the thesis.
- B. Develop in separate paragraphs the ideas suggested by the thesis statement; that is, formulate topic sentences and present supporting ideas for each topic sentence for the body paragraphs planned for the essay.
- C. Make sure that appropriate transitional devices are used as aids in the smooth development of ideas.
- D. Create a concluding paragraph that assesses ideas already discussed and restates key words or concepts presented in the body of the essay. No new ideas are appropriate in the conclusion.
- E. To facilitate the proofreading and revising process, write on every other line of your paper.

### **3. Proofreading and Revising**

- A. Reread your essay for logic, clarity, and appropriate grammar, mechanics, transitions, diction, and style.
- B. Make revisions by drawing a line through the errors and/or unacceptable sentences or passages and using the space above them to write the corrections or revised versions.
- C. Rewrite entire pages only if necessary; adequate planning should make a rewrite of the entire essay unnecessary.



## SAMPLE ESSAYS

The following two essays are samples submitted by students in previous semesters. You will find a detailed evaluation of the first essay, “Homeschooling and the Effect it has on Developing Young Adults,” below. The second essay entitled, “The Diary of a Blogger,” received a “6 - exceptional response” on the exam and could be used as a model for effective essay writing.

### **Essay #1: Homeschooling and the Effect it has on Developing Young Adults**

1           Homeschooling is a practice that has become increasing popular over the past decade. Parents  
2 across the country and the world are removing their children from both public and private institutions and  
3 choosing to educate them at home. The reasons that many of these parents have given are valid. Schools  
4 are becoming more violent, teachers are not performing to the standard set by the state’s school board, and  
5 some children are being lost in the shuffle. But even with all of the valid reasons given above, homeschooled  
6 children who are beginning to enter into their teens and early college years are finding themselves presented  
7 with a whole new set of problems. They are often not prepared to deal with the social aspects of growing  
8 up, they have often been given a false sense of reality, and may not have been properly trained by their  
9 parents.

10           Social interaction with peers is something that people of all ages have to deal with, but the lack of  
11 this interaction that homeschoolers are faced with can prove to be detrimental to their development as  
12 functioning adults. The social cliques that one may encounter in a school setting often help one to determine  
13 the type of individual that that individual wants to become or does not want to become. By being around  
14 people of different backgrounds, ethnic and otherwise, people begin to receive a small dose of what the  
15 world is like. This interaction in turn gives them the chance to adjust and learn about these differences if

16 they are encountered again, but homeschoolers are often denied this opportunity. They are often very  
17 sheltered and limited in what their families and communities believe in and are sometimes not given the  
18 chance to develop into their own individuality, but are expected to become an exact extension of their  
19 parents or other community influences.

20 Another challenge that homeschoolers may face is lack of preparedness. Many times the children  
21 taught at home are taught by their parents who may mean well, but are not trained properly on how to  
22 educate their children on the necessary subject matter. This now puts these children at a disadvantage if and  
23 when they choose to enter back into the school system. Teachers who are trained in a particular area often  
24 choose to make subtle changes to their curriculum in areas that they may feel their students are lacking or  
25 that the students may encounter at a later date. Homeschooled children are now robbed of the opportunity  
26 for an extra dose of education because of inadequately trained parents who have chosen to teach only what  
27 is stipulated by the school board which is not always what students need to succeed in their next learning  
28 experience.

29 Finally, homeschooling gives a false sense of reality. When these homeschoolers enter into a non-  
30 sheltered environment they may encounter problems adjusting. They are finding themselves coming from an  
31 environment where they may have been the only student or one of a few and may have had the undivided  
32 attention of their educator. Whereas once they are placed in a community school environment they are faced  
33 with the challenge of having to share the attention with others. They may also have to deal with the lack of  
34 patience that some educators may have. At home, their parents or tutors may have had an unlimited amount  
35 of time to spend ensuring that they mastered a particular subject, while in a real school setting the educator

36 has to respond to needs of all of the students and does not have the time to devote hours to one student.  
37 This may now make the previously homeschooled individual feels as if no one cares and may begin to affect  
38 their overall performance.

39           Although the concept of homeschooling may have benefits in the areas of protecting children from  
40 potentially violent situations and other serious problems that children may encounter in the public school  
41 arena, it is also beginning to create socially deformed children. These children are not given the chance to  
42 develop into their own person or just the simple everyday interaction with other people. They are being  
43 given the idea that they will always be the center of attention and are not learning the practice of thinking on  
44 their own without being lead the entire way. Homeschooling may start out as an advantage in young  
45 children, but as these children grown into young adults this practice becomes a hinderance in their overall  
46 development.

### **Essay Strengths :**

- Thesis, underlined above, is clearly stated in a declarative sentence. The preview statement immediately following suggests three ideas presented in a parallel structure (lines 7-9), thus, indicating the organizational pattern.
- All ideas suggested by the thesis are treated in the body paragraphs.
- Transitions are appropriately used. Key words such as “another” and “finally” are used in moving from one paragraph to the next and from one idea to the next within paragraphs.
- Concrete examples are used to support several of the points made (lines 14-17 and 35-38).
- The conclusion conforms to the guidelines for structuring a concluding paragraph (see conclusion parameters under “Structure of the formal essay”). Note also that the writer avoids the trite expression “in conclusion” or “in summary” (see line 41).
- The essay as a whole demonstrates the writer’s proficiency in standard written English.
- The Essay received a “5 -- commendable response” on the holistic rubric.

### **Essay Weaknesses:**

- A series of grammatical and spelling errors are made. Note lines 19, 25 and 28, for example.
- Several sentence fragments were written, which can impact the goal of particular paragraphs.
- The organization provided in the introduction is not specifically followed in the rest of the document (ordered incorrectly).
- Whereas some of the ideas presented in the developmental (body) paragraphs are supported by concrete examples or details, some others are not. For example, what does the writer mean by a “lack of preparedness” (line 21)? An example would clarify this point further.

## Essay #2

### The Diary of a Blogger

According to recent statistics found in *The New York Times*, three out of every ten internet users on the World Wide Web are authors of a blog. The term “blog” is a phrase the internet community has developed to describe an online web log and the term “blogger” is the individual who facilitates an online journal or log. Blogging exemplifies the natural cohesion of modern technology and human expression. This style of journal writing has spread tremendously over the last five years. One may find three general types of bloggers on the internet: the engager, the concealer, and the informer.

The engager’s style of blogging is one that is based on fascination. This writer does an extraordinary job at keeping the reader engrossed in their daily, weekly, and monthly events. The entries written by the engager may refer to social, familial, or work related events. The ongoing theme is one of enticement and interest, which allows the reader to establish a sense of intrigue. One may argue that the engager is the most popular of the three.

When considering the style of each blogger, the concealer is described as the most discreet. The concealer does an effective job at defending their privacy. This author divulges just enough information to lure the reader in, while still maintaining a level of cautiousness concerning their personal lives. One may be able to gather just enough information from this blogger to remain interested in their thoughts and daily musings. The reader might continue to read the blog in hopes of learning a bit more about the author after each entry.

An enlightening and knowledgeable blog is the only variety of blogging that is facilitated by the informer. The informer’s mission is to submit to the public fact-based articles. These entries always serve the purpose of instructing, notifying, or advising the reader. The general topics that the informer provides may vary from social, political, or technological themes. The one consistency of the informer is their solid aversion of entries disclosing personal issues.

After careful consideration of each style of blogging, it is up to the reader to decide which blogger meets their needs or personal interests. The goal of each blogger remains the same—self expression. The element of human expression can be found in the writings of the engager, the concealer, and the informer. There is a desire within each author to express thoughts and ideas.

## SAMPLE ESSAY TOPICS

(Please note that the topics below will not appear on the topic list for this semester's examination. These topics are presented only as samples of the type of topics or topic categories you may see on the exam. You are encouraged to utilize these topics to practice critical thinking, selecting, organizing, and developing ideas for an effective essay).

1. Explain why a particular public figure (a politician, athlete, musician, actor, etc.) is worthy of (OR should not be considered worthy of) admiration.
2. Speculations about the future economic well-being of \_\_\_\_\_ (name a specific country, state, county, city, community, organization, or institution).
3. In her book, "Don't Play in the Sun," Marita Golden proclaims that colorism (or the color complex) remains a significant issue negatively affecting the way in which people of Africana communities interact with one another. To what extent do you agree or disagree with her stance? Support your position with concrete details and examples.
4. Describe an attraction or activity that visitors to your home country, state, city, or town might enjoy seeing or doing. What is the significance of the specific attraction or activity in relation to the history or culture of that country, state, city, or town?
5. Discuss the significance and impact of AIDS in \_\_\_\_\_ (name a specific geographic location, ethnic group, gender, or sexual orientation).

Choose **ONE** of the following broad topics, **CREATE A LIMITED TOPIC**, and develop this topic in a well-organized essay. Make sure that you formulate a thesis statement that clearly identifies your focus. Use concrete details to develop and support your thesis:

- |                                        |                                    |
|----------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| a) war                                 | f) dating                          |
| b) hip hop                             | g) role models                     |
| c) identify theft                      | h) gentrification in urban America |
| d) homeschooling                       | i) reality TV shows                |
| e) the use of blogs in our lives today | j) marriage                        |

## EXAMINATION SCORING RUBRIC

### **6--Exceptional Response**

Overall, the response is perceptive and sophisticated, providing an exceptional explanation, orienting the reader to an opinion and contextualizing its importance. The writer incorporates compelling logic and reasoning through evidence, controlling a wide range of stylistic elements appropriate for exposition (point of view, word choice, syntax, tone, figurative language, or figures of speech). Though not without flaws, the writer effectively controls usage, including grammar, mechanics, and spelling, as appropriate to the content.

### **5--Commendable Response**

Overall, the response is thoughtful and effective, providing a commendable explanation, orienting the reader to an opinion and contextualizing its importance. The writer incorporates sound logic and reasoning through evidence, controlling a range of stylistic elements appropriate for exposition (point of view, word choice, syntax, tone, figurative language, or figures of speech). The writer controls usage, grammar, mechanics, and spelling with occasional lapses.

### **4--Adequate Response**

Overall, the response is plausible and functional providing an adequate explanation, orienting the reader to an opinion and contextualizing its importance. The writer incorporates sufficient logic and reasoning through evidence, controlling a restricted range of stylistic elements appropriate for exposition (point of view, word choice, syntax, tone, figurative language, or figures of speech). Errors in usage, grammar, mechanics, and spelling may occur, but do not confuse meaning.

### **3--Limited Response**

Overall, the response is vague and simplistic providing a limited explanation with little orientation to an opinion and its importance. The writer incorporates limited evidence resulting in confused reasoning and/or flawed logic, and applies few stylistic elements appropriate for exposition (point of view, word choice, syntax, tone, figurative language, or figures of speech). Numerous errors in usage, grammar, mechanics, and spelling occur, causing distraction and some confusion.

### **2--Negligible Response**

Overall, the response is incomplete and inconsistent, providing a negligible explanation for an opinion or its importance. The writer presents an opinion with little or no evidence, reasoning, or logic and neglects stylistic elements appropriate for exposition (word choice, syntax, tone, figurative language, or figures of speech). Critical errors in usage, grammar, mechanics, and spelling confuse meaning.

### **1--Minimum Response**

Overall, the response is unfocused and pointless, and may simply paraphrase or repeat the prompt. The stylistic elements are limited to basic word choices and fragmented or simple sentence patterns. Serious usage, grammar, mechanical, and spelling errors may lead to incoherence.

### **0--Unscorable (Consult Table Leader)**

The unscorable response is off topic, not written in English, or illegible.

Courtesy of Graduate Record Exam and the Lincoln (NE) Public Schools

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

**Q. Who has to take the exam?**

**A.** All students of the Graduate School are required to take this exam, unless exempt, as mandated by the Board of Trustees. Students may only be exempt from the exam if they have scores of 5 and above on the GRE Analytical Writing Assessment.

**Q. When must students take the exam?**

**A.** Students must take the exam at the beginning of their first semester in the Graduate School. If the exam reveals that your writing does not satisfy program standards, you will have ample time to improve your writing skills.

**Q. What is the exam like?**

**A.** The exam consists of a 500-word essay written in a 2-3 hour period on a topic chosen by the student from a list provided by PASS. The topics generated usually require the student to remark on current events, a personal stance, or even a policy issue. Students are expected to complete their essay with the computer, however arrangements can be made for those students with a preference to write their essay. Please contact the PASS office in advance of an exam date to schedule such a request.

**Q. Can I fulfill this requirement by passing a course instead of taking the exam?**

**A.** No.

**Q. When and where is the exam given?**

**A.** The exam is given once during the Fall (August), Spring (January), and first summer session (May) of each academic year. Students should look for updates on the PASS website for exam locations.

**Q. Is registration required for the exam?**

**A.** Yes, student must register online (<http://www.gs.howard.edu/ewp/writprogcertificatefrm99.htm>). Only students who register online will be permitted to enter the exam. Registration forms are necessary for entrance into the exam, so please be sure to print out the document after registering.

**Q. How can I prepare for the exam?**

**A.** Because this exam measures a skill that takes time to develop, there is no quick and easy way to prepare for it. The best preparation is to have done a considerable amount of reading and writing, and to have taken writing seriously throughout your academic career. Students may also use any college English handbook to review sections on composition writing and conventions. Copies of the EPE guidelines may be obtained from the PASS website or office (Room 317-A in the Graduate School).

**Q. Are special provisions made for disabled students?**

**A.** Yes. Please call the PASS office for more information 202.806.6864.

**Q. Are special provisions made for students who are International and/or non-native speakers of English?**

**A.** No. Speakers of English as a second language will be scored on the same basis as native speakers. While some provision is made for minor variances in syntax and idiomatic usage (i.e., use of prepositions and articles), faculty readers apply the same standards with respect to the major considerations of logic, organization, and grammar.

**Q. How is the test graded?**

**A.** Each essay is read and evaluated by at least two faculty readers utilizing the 6-point holistic scoring rubric. Students must receive a 5 or better to receive a certificate of completion. If the two readers disagree greatly on the student's essay, the paper is scored by a third reader.

**Q. Can I take the exam more than once?**

**A.** No. Students who fail the exam must register for an Academic Communication course (I and/or II) to improve upon their writing skills. A certificate of completion will be granted after successful completion of the course(s).

**Q. How and who will be notified of the exam results?**

**A.** Results will be posted online for access by the student. Department chairs and graduate studies directors may also request the information directly from the PASS office. Copies of certificates of completion are sent to the student's department, as well as the Office for Education Affairs in the Graduate School. Students **must** visit the PASS office to obtain a personal copy of the document.

**Q. If I do not pass, can I talk to someone about my essay?**

**A.** Yes. Students are encouraged to meet with a PASS instructor to discuss the essay. Please contact the PASS office for a list of instructors. This meeting may help crystallize your writing deficiencies, however it does not suffice as a successful completion of the exam and/or writing courses. You should be aware that meetings during the summer (from June through August) are limited.

**Q. If after meeting to discuss my essay, I believe that my essay was wrongly scored and I should have passed the exam is there an appeal procedure?**

**A.** Yes. The director of PASS will explain the appeal procedure to you.

**Q. If I do not pass, what are my next steps?**

- A.** Students may be required to take the one-credit writing courses offered by PASS. Students are informed of the appropriate course(s) when viewing their scores online. The writing courses meet once a week for a two-hour period. Students will be required to complete a series of writing assignments, and may be expected to complete computer-assisted work and/or one-on-one tutorial sessions.

Should you be required to take a writing course, it is best to register during the semester you have taken the exam. Please note that students must satisfy this requirement prior to entering candidacy and at least one semester prior to graduation. To register for a course, students may contact the PASS office to complete a drop/add form at the beginning of each semester.

**Q. What courses are offered?**

- A.** Academic Communication I focuses on the conventions and mechanics of writing (i.e. grammar, spelling, and punctuation). Academic Communication II focuses on the content and development of writing (thesis development, paragraph structure, and organization). Additional courses are being added to PASS that will assist with academic writing in the various disciplines and oral communication skills.

**Q. Are there any other requirements for writing?**

- A.** No. Once you successfully complete the exam and/or course(s), there are no other requirements to fulfill.

## **IMPORTANT REMINDERS FOR EXAM**

1. Do not underline your title or enclose it in quotation marks.
2. Do not capitalize unnecessarily.
3. Do not put periods or full stops at the end of your title.
4. Avoid writing one-sentence paragraphs.
5. Avoid abbreviations or contractions.
6. Do not write a first-person essay (“I”); avoid second-person (“you”) references.
7. If writing your essay by hand, write on every other line (skip a line).
8. Leave a margin at the top, bottom, and right.
9. Indent for paragraph beginnings.
10. Clearly state your thesis (your claim, position, or controlling idea).
11. Use appropriate transitions.
12. Use your dictionary/thesaurus to check the spelling or meaning of words.
13. **GOOD LUCK!**