



## Using the Writer's Alley Interactive Writing Tutorial for Practice ACT Essays

Sometimes it feels as if one event can determine everything. Many students feel that way about the college entrance exams they have to take, often when college seems a distant world. As writing and communication skills become a key indicator of success in our information age, and as students seem less prepared for the kind of writing they need to do in college, the essay portion of the ACT and SAT become more important. Like any test, the ability to do well is determined in large part to skill and knowledge, but also to savvy about taking the test—which comes from practice.

The best way to practice is to try writing from actual prompts. For a good selection of writing prompts check out <http://startwhereyouarevtpro.org/Files/ACT%20writing%20prompts%20for%20practice4.pdf> and select a couple that look challenging—or do them all over time. (Please note: you have to type in this URL or you can't get access to the link.)

I haven't graded ACT or SAT essays, but I have been trained and spent a couple years as a grader of this type of standardized writing test. The training I participated in is designed to get readers with a variety of opinions to focus their grading on key elements, and by doing so to create a consistent formula for grading. With this in mind, I looked at a set of comments from ACT graders. After reviewing comments on practice tests, I found that the graders seem to be looking for several key factors:

- Knowing and understanding the question
- A clear position on the issue
- Critical context of the issue
- Knowledge and ability to deal with counterarguments
- Organizational strategy and use of transitions
- Effective introductions and conclusions
- Use of language
- Grammatical correctness

I'd like to take each of these and discuss how a student can address them. If a student has 30 minutes for an essay, using the time effectively is important. If a student allots 5 minutes to read the prompt and plan and 5 minutes to review the finished essay and make corrections that would leave 20 minutes to write. The writing situation requires a plan and fast thinking.

### **Knowing and Understanding the Question**

In an ideal world, the question or prompt would be one that the writer has thought about and has information and insight into. Although that isn't always the case, the prompt itself can provide some information to get you thinking. Usually the prompt will describe an issue with two apparent sides (and if you think about it there is probably a third, unwritten, option that could make your essay even more original). As you read the prompt, underline the core issue and circle the words that indicate the two sides. Choose one side so your essay will be focused. You can usually choose to be for something, against something or to propose a compromise position. Quickly jot down any initial thoughts that occur to you to support your side. Also be prepared to consider what the other side would argue.

You can use the Writer's Alley Interactive Writing Tutorial to help you here. Use the Checklist to work out these ideas for a practice essay. When you get into the actual test-taking situation, you can use the skills and insights you gained to help you think through the prompt, even if you can't use the tutorial at that time.

### **Clear Position on the Issue**

The graders of the exams are looking for focus in the essays they grade. Once you decide on the position you will take, you should clearly and consistently support that position. Develop a precise thesis statement to direct your writing and to let the graders know what you are discussing. Use the Thesis section to learn how to develop clear and focused thesis statements. Once you get into the habit of asking yourself and answering the three questions provided, writing a thesis statement will become easy.

It's not enough to start out with a clear focus; you have to stick to your original idea throughout the entire essay. All points you make should relate directly to the thesis. You should offer a clear explanation of the connections you are making. If you write a thesis statement with a plan and follow the plan throughout your essay, you can stay on track.

### **Critical Context**

This is a difficult component to define. The graders are looking for students to set up the topic by providing some background about it. In the simplest essays, this appears as a sentence or two in the introduction. Critical context can also be woven into the essay by including the background of each sub-point as part of the explanation in each paragraph.

To incorporate the critical context into an essay, practice using the different styles of introduction in the Writer's Alley Interactive Writing Tutorial—and in each introduction include some background information. The problem with this is that it requires a little more knowledge of the topic or an educated guess.

If you do not have enough knowledge, you can use the prompt to guide you. If you have underlined the issue and circled the two (or more) sides listed in the prompt, construct a sentence like this (instructions which are not actually part of the sentence are highlighted):

In this issue of \_\_\_\_\_, there has been a disagreement between \_\_\_\_\_ [include the people or groups who advocate one side, if you know it; if not, just fill in this blank with the word people] who believe \_\_\_\_\_ [concisely state one side of the issue] and \_\_\_\_\_ [include people or groups as above] who believe \_\_\_\_\_.

If you plan to choose one of these sides and argue against the other, you can say:

It is clear that \_\_\_\_\_ is correct because \_\_\_\_\_.

If you plan to focus on a compromise or alternative solution, you can say,

The better answer is to \_\_\_\_\_.

### **Knowledge and Counterarguments**

The prompts in the ACT and SAT deal with issues and ideas that high school students will most likely be familiar with. The prompts you end up with are largely due to chance, though, and may be on topics that you are not particularly knowledgeable or interested in. Graders are looking for the way you display your knowledge.

The more specific you can be in your choice of words and use of examples, the more knowledgeable you will appear. Draw on any related topics that you know more about and make comparisons—only if you can be sure your essay will not become unfocused and illogical (the Comparison/Contrast template in the Writer’s Alley Interactive Writing Tutorial has some examples of how to do this). If you can come up with only one extended example that illustrates your point, use it as support throughout your essay—though, of course, more specific and relevant examples are always better.

Include a paragraph in which you state the opposing point of view—clearly marked as an opposing view, so graders don’t think you have suddenly changed your mind in the essay. If you don’t know what the opposing point of view is, go back to the prompt, and try to work it out. Follow that with logical reasons why your point of view is better. If you can reinforce your point with evidence, you’ll most likely score higher. Review the explanation and template for Classical Argument in The Writer’s Alley Interactive Writing Tutorial for an idea of how to work this into your essay.

## **Organizational Strategy and Use of Transitions**

Writing under pressure on topics you are not exactly familiar with can be confusing. The trick, though, is to not let that filter into your essay. You can do two things to keep yourself on track:

- Write a thesis statement with a plan for how to cover the topic, and follow that plan.
- Jot down the points you will cover and the order you will cover them in. Cross each point off as you complete writing about it. (IF you have time.)

Another way to signal to the graders that you are following a logical progression of ideas is to include transitions. Transitions bridge the gap from one idea to the next in the reader's mind, making the flow of an essay seem logical. You can practice writing transitions and find some key vocabulary for indicating connections between ideas in The Writer's Alley Interactive Writing Tutorial.

## **Effective Introductions and Conclusions**

The beginning and end of your essay are the most memorable points—and they have a great deal of influence on a grader's assessment. Use these as opportunities to display your best skills.

If you start with an excellent introduction, that shapes a grader's perception of the rest of the essay (though be careful not to stray too far from your excellent start). The more specific and engaging you can make your introduction, the better your writing will appear.

In the conclusion, you want to reinforce your points and leave the reader with something meaningful to think about. Explanations and examples of several types of introductions and conclusions are available in the Drafting section of the Writer's Alley tutorial.

## **Use of Language**

Graders of the essays are looking for a vocabulary that reflects college level thinking. Use your time reading and learning vocabulary that shows you are a knowledgeable and sophisticated thinker. Be careful to really know the words you use and to use them correctly. It's better to use small, clear words that convey the correct meaning than to use big words that are wrong. You want your writing to sound like your natural voice—but a college version of your natural voice. Using transition words will also help your paper seem more logical and convey your knowledge better.

## **Grammatical Correctness**

As you are writing, and your thoughts are flowing, it's natural to make mistakes. You probably won't notice those mistakes as you are writing. The best way to catch them is to save a little time at the end of the writing period to review your paper. Leave space as you write so if you need to go back and make corrections you can do so legibly.

If you get a couple of seconds of writer's block, you can review what you have written so far and make corrections on parts of your paper as you write, but do NOT spend too much time on this and jeopardize your ability to finish the essay.

Knowing the types of grammar errors you commonly make might help you to find those errors and correct them in your essay, if you have time. Use the Grammar Log under Student Resources in Writer's Alley to start tracking your grammar long before the test. You can even find a teacher who might help you learn the corrections, so you'll be prepared when you are writing your essay.

Even if you can't find every comma error, eliminating the big and obvious problems will help you improve your score. If you leave a little time at the end of the essay period, you can do a few things:

- Read over each sentence to make sure it makes sense and says what you mean to say.
- Check to be sure your subject-verb agreement is correct throughout the essay.
- Look for sentence fragments and run-on sentences and correct them.
- Make sure you spell words correctly and use them in the right way.

### **My Conclusion**

It's difficult to come up with an exact formula for success here. There are some essays that break a lot of rules but are so engaging and thought provoking that they work. There are some essays that follow all the rules but are so dull and unoriginal that they don't work. I know from experience that after reading over ten essays on the same topic, all organized in the standard five-paragraph theme, with no original ideas or engaging examples, they all start to look bad.

Practice writing essays, thinking through ideas, and debating issues will serve you well as you prepare for the essay prompts. A clear focus, specific and concrete support and a strong use of language will serve you well—and a few original and engaging ideas can't help either.

Good luck!