

The TASP Writing Sample

Understanding and Fulfilling the Writing Expectations of the Texas Academic Skills Program

I. UNDERSTANDING THE TASP WRITING EXPECTATIONS

The writing sample is an important part of the Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP) Test. Although the writing sample can present difficulties for the unprepared or unsuspecting student, there are some basic steps which can prepare you to write an acceptable essay for this test. This is accomplished by understanding what is expected of you in this essay and learning how to fulfill these expectations.

UNDERSTANDING THE SCORING METHOD

The TASP writing sample is graded by a technique called holistic scoring. The principle underlying the holistic scoring process is that a writing sample should be evaluated on the basis of how effectively it communicates a whole message to a specified audience for a given purpose. That is, scorers judge the overall effectiveness of the writing sample rather than considering separately the individual aspects of writing. Specific characteristics of competent writing, such as organization, unity, and mechanical conventions, are the focus of scoring; however, the scoring process is holistic because the final score for a writing sample rates the overall effectiveness of these characteristics.

A satisfactory essay is one that demonstrates the ability to communicate effectively in writing based on the characteristics that are listed in the TASP Test Sample Directions. In general, an essay will receive a higher score the more it:

- uses language and style appropriate to the given audience, purpose, and occasion;
- states and maintains clear focus on one main idea or point of view;
- develops the main idea effectively in terms of amount, depth, and specificity of supporting details;
- shows clear organization of its ideas;
- displays standard and effective sentence structure;
- uses words correctly and exhibits care and precision in word choice; and
- follows the convention of correct spelling, capitalization, and punctuation.

UNDERSTANDING THE WRITING PROMPT

The writing sample portion of the TASP begins by presenting you with what is called a "prompt." The following is an actual prompt which has been used on the TASP writing test.

History reveals that some inventions have had a profound impact on society. Write an essay, to be read by a history teacher, about an invention that has benefited society. Identify the invention and explain how it has improved people's lives, using examples or illustrations to support your ideas. Your purpose in writing is to show how that invention has had a significant, positive impact on society.

Notice that this prompt, like all the TASP writing prompts, does several important things. The prompt

1. announces a general topic about which you are to write, i.e., inventions,
2. limits your topic, i.e., an specific invention selected by you,
3. defines your purpose by explaining why you are writing, i.e., to show how your selected invention has benefited society, and
4. identifies the audience who is to read your essay.

The last element of the audience, a history teacher in this prompt, simply means that you are to write to a college educated person. This is a way of ensuring that you write good, standard "edited American English." Edited American English is the official term for the standard written English that is used by writers in the United States to communicate formally in materials such as textbooks, magazines, newspapers, and business and government documents. In other words, you should not employ slang, street language, colloquialisms, etc.

GETTING STARTED

Before you start writing, it is a good idea to spend a few minutes in organizing your thoughts and developing a plan of attack. Do this on a piece of the provided scratch paper.

Look at the prompt and identify the general subject. Write it in the center of the scratch paper. In the prompt above, the general subject is INVENTIONS. Next, you must limit the general subject by selecting a specific invention. But before selecting one specific invention, you might start by simply listing several specific inventions around the general subject. Since your purpose is to discuss the positive impact or social benefits of an invention, try to jot down several benefits for each of the specific inventions you have listed. You might have developed something like this:

- steam boats - railroads	- travel distance in less time - for work & pleasure	- entertains - educates - informs
STEAM ENGINE	AUTOMOBILE	TELEVISION

INVENTIONS

COMPUTER	TELEPHONE
- rapid calculating machine - reliable machine - diverse applications	- immediate communication - changed business practices

Now examine the results. For which invention have you listed the most benefits? With which list of benefits do you feel the most comfortable? This is probably the invention you should select for your essay.

A SCORED ESSAY

The following essay was actually written by a student taking the TASP Test. We will refer to this sample essay in the following discussion to illustrate the basic elements of the TASP writing sample. Read the Scored Essay.

Throughout history, many inventions have had a profound impact on society. The computer is one invention that has benefited society greatly. This benefit has been realized through the computer's quickness, reliability; and performance.

The computer is the fastest calculating machine known to man. It can process data composed of millions of items in less than a minute. Because of this feature, many tasks that had previously taken days or week can be performed by the computer in a matter of seconds. Putting the computer's quickness to work, businesses have been able to increase their productivity. Quickness is one aspect that identifies the computer as a great benefit to society.

The computer is also one of the most reliable machines in one society. When compared to the number of computers in use, there are very few cases of computer failure. Most errors commonly associated with computers turn out to be the result of human error. The reliability of the computer has increased the accuracy and efficiency of many aspects of government and business. When we think about something being available when it is needed, reliability is an important aspect that identifies the computer as a benefit to society.

Notwithstanding the computer's quickness and reliability, the performance of the computer is its most important societal benefit. There is a computer that can perform any task. For example, computers control robots building cars on automobile assembly lines. Also, computers are used to design aircraft, assist in flight reservation and aid the pilot in flying. There are computers that obey voice commands and assist the handicaped. In every area, in our lives, the performance of a computer can be equalled by no other machine.

The quickness, reliability, and the many applications of the computers are the major benefits the computer provides to society today. Because of these things, and all that computers will do for us in the future. The computer is the most beneficial invention in human history.

As you read the Scored Essay, you probably noticed that it is not an especially profound essay; nor is it a grammatically perfect essay. But it does exhibit certain basic elements for which the graders will be looking. And it does a good job of fulfilling the expectations of the graders. It was even given a perfect score of 4. In the next section we will examine what the graders expect, how the Scored Essay fulfills the grader's expectations, and offer you opportunities to practice these expectations.

II. FULFILLING THE TASP WRITING EXPECTATIONS

Fulfilling TASP writing expectations is a rather easy task if you take the time to learn and follow some easy procedures. We want to highlight six simple steps to writing good essays. Following these six steps will develop good, effective written communication and lead to passage of the TASP Writing sample.

STEP ONE: Write a declarative sentence which makes a supportable or arguable point.

The most important step in fulfilling the TASP writing expectations is developing a "supportable" point or sentence. A supportable sentence is one which permits the writer to expand, defend, explain, or illustrate it. It is the type of sentence which raises certain questions in the reader's mind. These questions call for additional information. Thus, they permit the writer to explain how or why. Some sentences by their structure and content are not supportable, that is, they do not raise a

series of additional questions which demand answers. Look at the following sentences:

(1a) Austin is the capital of Texas.

(1b) My dad is 50 years old.

Do these sentences raise any kind of questions in your mind? What more can be asked regarding these sentences? About the only thing that can be asked is whether these sentences are true or false. Beyond this, these sentences leave us no place to go, nothing else to be said, no way to support them. We might think of these sentences as merely stating "facts" which are capable of being true or false.

In contrast, look at the following sentences which differ from the sentences above in an important way:

(2a) Austin is a unique city.

(2b) My dad is a cheapskate.

These sentences raise questions in the reader's minds. How is Austin unique? Why does the writer think his dad is a cheapskate? These sentences require some explanation or reason. And they give the writer an opportunity to EXPLAIN how, why, or in what way. They offer the writer some place to go, something else to be said. We could say that these sentences merely state "opinions" which are in need of support. They are the type of supportable sentences which you must develop as a thesis statement for the TASP writing sample.

EXERCISE 1.1

Identify which of the following is a supportable sentence by placing the letter S in front of it and which is a non-supportable sentence by placing an N in front of it.

1. Fox Tech High School is on Main Avenue.
2. Fox Tech High School is the best school in town.
3. Dolphins are mammals.
4. Dolphins are very intelligent creatures.
5. Cheeseburgers are a nutritious food item which should be included in everyone's diet.
6. Cheeseburgers contain cheese.
7. A yard contains 39 inches.
8. My favorite pet is the cat.
9. The American Indian has been mistreated.
10. President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas in 1963.
11. A brother is a male sibling.
12. Los Angeles is in California.
13. The Los Angeles riots resulted from police brutality.
14. Look out for that car!
15. The telephone has benefited society greatly.

EXERCISE 1.2

Look at the opening paragraph of the Scored Essay on inventions. Draw a box around the Step One supportable sentence within that paragraph.

EXERCISE 1.3

Write your own declarative sentence which makes a supportable or arguable point about an invention.

EXERCISE 1.4

For each of the following topics, write both a supportable and a non-supportable sentence. Show your sentences to your English teacher or writing tutor for feedback.

1. My best friend.
2. Clothes
3. Exercise
4. Sea World
5. Pollution

Supportable sentences of this type are also called "thesis statements." Once you have developed the skill of writing supportable thesis statements, you are ready to take the next step. This step is also easily accomplished.

STEP TWO: Write three sentences supporting, or arguing for, the sentence you wrote in Step One.

Each of these sentences must be about the complete Step One sentence, and not a part of it. That is, it must focus on both the complete subject and complete predicate of your Step One sentence. Referring back to the sentence, "My dad is a cheapskate," for example, these three new sentences must say something about both "dad" and his being a "cheapskate." They should explain how or why dad should be regarded as a cheapskate. For example, you might have written the following statements which explain HOW or WHY dad is a cheapskate:

- (2b-1) Dad seldom spends money on himself.
- (2b-2) Dad does not spend money on his friends.
- (2b-3) Dad seldom spends money on what he called "non-essential" things for his family.

Each of these new sentences supports (explains how or why) some way in which dad is cheap. You might even think of sentence 2b-1 as an abbreviated version of the complex sentence, "My dad is a cheapskate because he seldom spends money on himself." Notice that the subject and the predicate of the Step One sentence is being explained, expanded, or supported by each of these additional sentences. Each of these sentences will become the topic sentence of each new supporting paragraph.

EXERCISE 2.1

Look at the Scored Essay on inventions. Underline each of the three Step Two sentences.

EXERCISE 2.2

Write three supporting sentences for each of the supportable sentences you wrote in Exercise 1.4 (in other words, write three sentences which explain, expand, or support each of your Step One sentences). Show them to your English teacher or writing tutor for feedback.

STEP THREE: Write four or five sentences supporting each of your Step Two sentences.

This is the point where you need to become as specific and concrete as possible. You should offer details, provide examples, state statistics, tell stories. In attempting to support the sentence that "my dad seldom spent money on what he called 'non-essential' things for his family", you might have included any or all of the following:

Dad never allowed us to buy designer jeans or shirts.

He also insisted that each of us children wear hand-me-downs.

He never bought flowers for my mother.

The only time we ate out in restaurants were on Mother's Day or someone's birthday.

A vacation for my dad was a weekend at the coast or a trip to grandpa's house.

This is an example of a "shotgun approach" in which we simply list a series of sentences giving support to the Step Two sentence. Notice that each of these new sentences support the primary thesis but are not related to each other.

We might also have used a "tunnel vision" approach in which we select one specific item or event and then expand with as many details or examples as necessary. The following is an example of how one might have used a tunnel vision approach to support the same sentence:

Last Sunday, for example, my father walked the family to and from church.

Returning home, he helped mother prepare sandwiches from Saturday's leftovers.

After lunch, dad led the family to the park across the street to play ball.

He even brought along a jug of Kool-Aid to quench our thirst.

And that evening, my dad insisted that we finish the sandwiches and Kool-Aid for our supper.

EXERCISE 3.1

Look at the three supporting paragraphs of the Scored Essay on Inventions. Which paragraph do you think contains the most specific and concrete examples to illustrate or support the Step Two sentence (or topic sentence of the paragraph)? Place a "star" beside it in the margin.

STEP FOUR: Starting in the second supporting paragraph, make sure that each topic sentence contains a clear reference to the main idea of the preceding paragraph.

If you look at line 26 of the Scored Essay on inventions, you will observe that the computer's "quickness and reliability" refer to the main ideas of each of the preceding paragraphs. Do you find the same clear reference in the topic sentence of the second supporting paragraph (line 15)? How might this topic sentence be improved?

STEP FIVE: Make certain that each sentence in a paragraph makes a clear reference to each preceding sentence.

The simplest way to achieve this clear reference is to repeat the same subject or a pronoun reference to it. If you look at the Scored Essay on inventions, you will observe that there is a word or idea in each sentence of every supporting paragraph which connects each sentence to the preceding sentence.

EXERCISE 4.1

Find the word or idea in the second paragraph that demonstrates Step Five. Circle the connecting word in each sentence. Find the connecting word or idea in the other paragraphs in the Scored Essay.

STEP SIX: Write clear, error-free sentences.

To this point we have focused on the basic organizational elements of an essay: selecting and limiting a topic, developing a supportable thesis statement, developing supporting sentences, providing concrete supporting details, and maintaining a clear focus. Now is the time to review your rough draft by focusing on each separate sentence and applying everything you know about sentence structure, punctuation, etc.

First, examine each sentence you have written for the basic elements of agreement such as subject-verb agreement, pronoun and antecedent agreement, using the same verb tense throughout a paragraph, etc. Second, you should check each sentence for the basic elements of sentence structure to make sure you have avoided errors such as comma-splices, sentence fragments, run-on sentences, dangling modifiers, etc. Finally, examine each sentence for the basic elements of language mechanics such as punctuation, capitalization, spelling, word-division, and paragraph indentation, etc.

EXERCISE 5.1

This is another essay which received a good score. Analyze this essay by applying the six steps. Can you identify the elements of this essay which fulfill each of the six steps?

The job of President of the United States is four years of important and difficult work. It is a job that requires a strong leader who has many good qualities and characteristics. Voters should look for a candidate who can communicate, has good reasoning skills and an understanding of human nature, and is a person of vision.

One quality required of a president is the ability to communicate well. The president must provide information to and persuade a variety of groups (the public, Congress, world leaders, etc.) on a wide range of topics. This is essential to her ability to lead our country and the free world. Without being an effective communicator, especially in this age of television and instant information, a president would find it difficult to lead effectively.

Another necessary skill is reasoning ability. She must evaluate both sides of issue and then choose the best path for our country to follow. A good president must use her reasoning powers to fully examine both sides, and not just bow to pressures to always maintain the status quo. She represents all citizens. Many current politicians I can think of seem to forget that. This fair approach will allow her to negotiate solutions to disputes among different groups.

A good understanding of human nature is also needed. A president is just one individual with humanly limitations of time and knowledge; so she must delegate power to others, like members of her cabinet. Without good people to carry out policies, advise her, support her, people cannot be assured that the job will get done. An understanding of human nature will help her select her people well. In addition, the president must have vision. She must be able to imagine what the needs of the country and the world may be like a year later, five years later, and so on into the future. Most of today's office holders lack this. This vision will help her in dealing with current problems and to find solutions that are not just temporary "band-aids" but are truly longterm solutions.

Voters must support only a candidate having these qualities. With these important characteristics, and others such as experience, good moral values, and compassion, a president will be well equipped to lead our great nation into the future.

Handout prepared by Ignacio Orozco and Richard Oliver
Student Learning Assistance Center (SLAC)
San Antonio College