

Reading and Writing Center
Kingsborough Community College

Getting to Know the CATW

The CUNY Assessment Test in Writing (CATW)--Abridged Guide #1
Excerpted from the *Student Handbook*/ Office of Assessment/ City
University of New York

The CUNY Assessment Test in Writing (CATW) is a standardized writing test that measures a student's ability to do college-level writing in English. Entering first-year students take the test to determine their placement into English composition, ESL, or developmental courses. In addition, the CATW is used to determine when students are ready to exit from developmental writing courses and move on to college-level courses.

The CATW asks you to write an essay in response to a reading passage you are given and to show competency in five categories. The five categories are (1) critical response to a text; (2) explanation and support of ideas; (3) organization of a response that has a clear beginning, middle, and end; and two elements of language use: (4) sentence construction and word choice, and (5) grammar, usage, and mechanics.

The learning skills taught in first-year college courses are reflected in the CATW, which assesses your ability to read, understand, and respond to a passage of 250-300 words. In the test, you are asked to:

- identify key ideas within the reading passage
- write a brief summary of the key ideas in the reading
- demonstrate basic critical thinking in response to these key ideas
- identify a key idea in the reading passage and present a clearly written response to that idea
- write an essay that is well organized and shows connections between ideas
- support ideas with relevant personal experience, readings, schoolwork, and/or other sources of information
- demonstrate competence in sentence construction, sentence variety, and word choice
- demonstrate correct usage, grammar, and mechanics

Format of the CUNY Assessment Test in Writing (CATW)

The CATW has two parts, a reading passage of 250-300 words and Writing Directions to guide students in preparing their written responses. *Students have 90 minutes to complete the test, and they may use a non-electronic dictionary, bilingual, if preferred.*

SAMPLE TEST:

Assignment

Begin by reading the passage below.

Hype

Advertisements are the most prevalent and toxic of the mental pollutants. From the moment your alarm sounds in the morning to the wee hours of late-night TV, commercial pollution floods your brain at the rate of about three thousand marketing messages per day. Every day an estimated 12 billion display ads, 3 million radio commercials, and more than 200,000 TV commercials are dumped into North America's collective unconscious. The increase in commercial advertising has happened so steadily and relentlessly that we haven't quite woken up to the absurdity of it all. No longer are ads confined to the usual places: buses, billboards, stadiums. Anywhere your eyes can possibly come to rest is now a place that, in corporate America's view, can and ought to be filled with a logo or product message.

You fill your car with gas, and there's an ad on the nozzle. You wait for your bank machine to spit out money and an ad scrolls by in the little window. You drive through the countryside and the view of the wheat fields is broken at intervals by enormous billboards. Your kids watch Pepsi and Snickers ads in the classroom. A company called VideoCarte installs interactive screens on supermarket carts so that you can see ads while you shop. (A company executive calls the little monitors "the most powerful micromarketing medium available today.") There is nowhere to run. No one is exempt and no one will be spared. In the silent moments of my life, I often used to hear Beethoven's Ninth Symphony play in my head. Now I hear that kid singing the Oscar Meyer wiener song.

Excerpted from Kalle Lasn. "Hype," in *Signs of Life in the USA: Readings on Popular Culture for Writers*, 4th ed. Sonia Maasik & Jack Solomon, Eds. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003. 217-220.

Writing Directions

Read the passage above and write an essay responding to the ideas it presents. In your essay, be sure to summarize the passage in your own words, stating the author's most important ideas. Develop your essay by identifying one idea in the passage that you feel is especially significant, and explain its significance. Support your claims with evidence or examples drawn from what you have read, learned in school, and/or personally experienced.

Remember to review your essay and make any changes or corrections that are needed to help your reader follow your thinking. You will have 90 minutes to complete your essay.

The CATW Reading Selection

One way to prepare for the test is to understand the types of readings used on the test. The reading passage that you will be asked to respond to will have the following characteristics:

- a. The text is 250-300 words in length.
- b. Reading passages are at 10th to 12th grade reading level and appropriate for high school graduates.
- c. Topics are familiar and interesting to high school graduates, and they will come from general knowledge areas (for instance, sociology, psychology, technology, popular culture, etc.).
- d. Readings are clearly written, with the author's main idea placed early in the passage, so that you can better identify the writer's central point and write a response based on the text.
- e. Readings come from the following sources: general interest magazines, newspaper articles, speeches, and excerpts of essays from academic anthologies. For example, *The Utne Reader*, *The New York Times*, *The Week* and *Slate.com* are good sources of engaging general interest articles.
- f. Reading passages will appear with a title and author's name. You are encouraged to refer to the author's last name and the title of the passage in your response.

Your Response Should ...

To prepare for the CATW, you should be aware of the required components of the response, as described in the scoring rubric [as appears in the complete version of the Student Handbook for the CATW/ Office of Assessment/ CUNY.

You should be able to:

- read and understand a short (250-300 words) reading passage written at the 10th to 12th grade reading level.
- identify the author's main ideas—and important supporting ideas—in the reading passage.
- read and understand the writing directions that accompany the reading passage, and address all parts of the writing task.

Your Response Should:

- include a brief summary of the author's main ideas and supporting ideas (two or three key points in the reading). This summary can be written either at the beginning of your response to the reading passage or throughout your essay.
- make direct reference to ideas in the reading passage, either with direct quotes or paraphrasing.
- be organized in a clear and logical way, with appropriate use of transitions to connect your ideas, supporting details, and examples.
- demonstrate your ability to write an essay that has a clear beginning, middle, and end.
- combine ideas from the reading passage with your own ideas about the text.
- demonstrate the ability to identify and address a *specific* idea in the reading passage that you feel is "significant" (it needn't be the author's main idea) and develop an essay in response to that idea, expanding through the use of explanation, supporting details, personal experience, and/or other reading you may have done.
- demonstrate the ability to write clear and varied sentences, and use vocabulary that clearly and effectively communicates your ideas.

You should:

manage your time during the exam period (90 minutes) to allow for proofreading and editing; check your response for errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

Getting to Know the CATW--Response Sheet

This packet has familiarized you with the basic format of the test: You know that it is based on a brief reading to which you must respond in writing. You understand that your response must demonstrate your understanding and critical thinking about the reading; highlight your specific interest(s) in the reading; draw on your own experience, reading, and observations related to the topic; and demonstrate clear and organized writing, including “beginning, middle, and end.” You will have 90 minutes to prepare, write, and proofread your written response.

Take some time to answer to the following questions as a way to help you and your peers further understand the nature of this test. These questions will prompt you to compare this type of writing and test-taking to other types of writing you may have done for school. Based on the information in this packet, please answer:

1. Is the CATW writing really just a summary of the reading? Answer yes or no, and explain:

2. Is the CATW writing like an “opinion piece” on the topic where your main job is to “agree” or “disagree” with the reading? Answer yes or no, and explain:

3. Is the CATW writing like a “freewriting” piece in which you use the reading to quickly launch into your own ideas, related to the topic, in a free-flowing, rambling, style? Answer yes or no, and explain:
