

Reading and Writing Center
Kingsborough Community College

Evaluating a CATW Writing Sample

The CUNY Assessment Test in Writing (CATW)--Abridged Guide #2
Adapted from the *Student Handbook*/ Office of Assessment/ City
University of New York

Today you will review a brief sample reading like the ones offered to students for the CATW, along with an example of a student essay written in response to the reading.

You may remember this brief reading from last session's "Getting to Know the CATW" packet, or from the Student Handbook (Office of Assessment/ CUNY), from which it is taken.

Review the reading:

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.

And remember that the instructions read this way:

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.

Now you are ready to consider how you, or another student, might respond to such a brief reading by way of writing--the CATW exam!

Get ready to discuss the work of one particular student. . .

A Sample Student Response to “Hype” by Kalle Hasn

Following is a sample student essay which received a “middle”-range score of 4 in all the different evaluation categories of writing. [Remember the five basic categories: (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.]

Since evaluation can range from a score of 1 (lowest) to 6 (highest) in all the categories, the student writing sample, you will notice, has both strengths and weaknesses.

Question to think about as you read: *Why might looking at a middle-range sample be helpful for you to actively learn about the exam?*

Student Sample:

In “Hype,” Kalle Lasn speaks of the significant number of advertisements that people are exposed to today. He refers to them as “mental pollutants,” implying that these ads are taking over our minds and playing a significant role in the way we think. Although I agree that I see hundreds of ads everyday, I feel that they are, in some ways, necessary to our functioning in society.

When I sit down and turn on the television, there’s a good chance many of the channels I flip through are showing a commercial for a new product, or a new movie, or a new T.V. series. Every ten minutes, the showing I’m watching goes into commercials for five minutes, in which time I may see five to ten different commercials. I don’t always realize it when I’m watching T.V., but I receive information about a lot of new things. I may learn about what hot new gadgets are available or about what kind of movies are showing in theatres. When I’m in the train or on the bus, there are ads within the cars, and also many can be seen outside through the window. Even when I’m on the internet, almost every website has ads by Goggle. I don’t always immediately take note of the ad I see, but I remember seeing a video once that explained how an ad may just be looked upon and the image of which remains in our brain, affecting us psychologically. Thus ads are a significant in our lives.

Although it may be irritating to see an ad come on in the middle of your favorite show, the information supplied by that ad may not be available to you anywhere else. Corporations create ads to keep us updated on what is new. In a world where everyone is so busy working and studying, many people won’t take the time to research and investigate what’s new in the world. Ads keep us informed while we’re busy doing more important things. Even if somebody’s not looking for a specific item, they may see something in an ad that interests them, and may otherwise not know about it. Ads are the only ways for hundreds of millions of people to find out about something.

Kalle Lasn is right that ads are everywhere and play a significant role in our lives. Probably most of the ads we see won’t be beneficial to us, but the concept of advertising is essential in our world for keeping people informed and for helping the economy.

Evaluating the Student Sample of Writing: *Why* Did It Receive a Middle-Range Score?

Directions: Your job is to read the student sample essay and decide which of the following aspects of writing (see below) are well done and which could be improved.

As you recognize areas for improvement, please suggest specific methods of improvement. (How, exactly, could the student writer do better?) **Your tutor may, and will probably, keep a list of specific suggestions, for particular criteria, on the board. (Feel free to keep your own list--you'll use it later!)**

Why Do This? This exercise will give you ideas on how to improve the essay. In this way, you can start to envision how **you** would write a similar, and possibly **better**, essay. If you can recognize areas for improvement, you are quickly learning something about the CATW and how to write well for all your college courses.

Remember that the essay represents a "middle" level of accomplishment. **You should also recognize the essay's strengths**, even though this exercise may seem to primarily focus on areas for improvement. (Thus, the responses you'll make to the different criteria are only in terms of "yes" and "no," plus an explanation.)

Criteria #1: Responding Critically to the Text

In this area, the essay must demonstrate that the writer understands and appreciates what the author is trying to say. The essay must therefore paraphrase, or restate, the important ideas and summarize--according to the text! There must be evidence that the student writer is actually "hearing" this particular writer's ideas and grasping his or her perspective.

Choose one:

Yes, the essay demonstrates a full and perceptive understanding of the author's main ideas.

No, the essay does not really go far enough in showing understanding of the author's general and specific ideas.

Comments/ Suggestions for the Writer:

Criteria #2: Development of Ideas

In this area, the essay must “develop” enough of the author’s main ideas (both general and specific) as noted above in category 1 (so there is some overlap here in terms of categories 1 and 2). However, the essay must also show understanding and appreciation of the topic **by connecting to the topic in a relevant way--i.e. by bringing in information and/or a personal perspective that complements or builds upon the author’s points** while sticking to the topic at hand. (Hint: The actual reading, “Hype,” deals with the pervasiveness of advertising--advertisements are everywhere! In paragraph 2 of the student’s writing, however, we might ask: Does the student writer stay close to this idea or does he/she veer away from it sometimes?) Also, does the student essay give enough, and detailed, examples and support for the points being made?

Choose one:

Yes, the essay demonstrates closely-related and fully-developed elaboration of ideas.

No, the essay shows some development but it could be improved in this area.

Comments/ Suggestions for the Writer:

Category #3: Structure of the Response:

In this area, the essay must demonstrate ideas and paragraphs that are well-organized. Each paragraph must give the strong impression that it is centered **some place--some "thread" of an idea must be evident throughout the paragraph**, holding it together. Paragraphs shouldn't be a jumble of ideas. If it is too difficult to say what the paragraph is "really about," chances are that it is trying to do too much, and it is disorganized. The use of transitions within and between paragraphs also give the essay a sense of "flow" and "cohesion."

Choose one:

____ **Yes**, the essay makes good use of structure and organization. Paragraphs are nicely organized and joined, one to the other, by way of transitions and a sense of "flow" or "direction."

____ **No**, the essay tries to do "too much" in some of the main paragraphs. It is not always easy to figure out what each paragraph is really about. Ideas in the essay could be better fitted together, within and between the paragraphs, for a more cohesive effect overall.

Comments/ Suggestions for the Writer:

Category #4/5: Sentences and Word Choice/ Grammar, Usage, and Mechanics

In this area, the essay must demonstrate basic competence in language. Sentences must be clear, usually causing little confusion in the reader. Word choice and vocabulary should be appropriate. The language is basically fine, while not necessarily completely correct.

Choose one:

___ **Yes**, the student basically uses language clearly.

___ **No**, there are many mistakes in language.

Comments/ Suggestions for the Writer:

Next Step: Look over your specific suggestions for the writer. Make a quick list of three or four items to be mindful of when writing a CATW essay. What should you keep in mind when writing a CATW essay?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

To Do Now (or at home, or at the next session): Putting Your Learning to Use

Use all that you have learned today to write your own CATW essay in response to “Hype” by Kalle Lasn. Start your essay in the space below and continue on your own paper.

And . . . Congratulations on All You Have Learned!