

A Sample of The CUNY Assessment Test in Writing

The question below is an example of the kind of question that students will be given for the CUNY Assessment Test in Writing. This one includes some information about a decision that must be made by a group of people and the criterion that will be used to make the decision. The student is asked to assist the group by choosing one alternative and explaining why it is the better choice.

Sample prompt:

A City Council in a large urban area wants to encourage people to use public transportation. The Council is considering two options but wants to choose the one that will be more effective. One option is to reduce fares for subways and buses. The other option is to improve service by providing more frequent subways and buses. Write a letter to the City Council in which you argue for reducing fares on subways and buses or for improving service by offering more frequent subways and buses, explaining why your choice is more likely to encourage people to use public transportation.

Begin your letter: Dear City Council:

Scoring the Writing Sample

Because this is a test of writing skills, responses should be as well-written as possible in the time allotted. Your response will be evaluated on your ability to address the question you have chosen, to develop and organize your ideas, and to use correct English sentence structure, usage, and mechanical conventions. Your response should conform to the conventions of edited American English.

Evaluators will use a six-point scale (printed below) to score the papers. Each score point reflects an evaluator's holistic (overall) judgment of the writer's performance in relationship to the skills identified above. Two CUNY evaluators who are carefully trained to score writing using this six-point scale will read each paper.

Scoring Scale

Upper-range papers. These papers clearly engage the issue identified in the prompts and demonstrate superior skill in organizing, developing, and conveying in standard written English the writer's ideas about the topic.

- 6 Exceptional.** These papers take a position on the issue defined in the prompt and support that position with extensive elaboration. Organization is unified and coherent. While there may be a few errors in mechanics, usage, or sentence structure, outstanding command of the language is apparent.
- 5 Superior.** These papers take a position on the issue defined in the prompt and support that position with moderate elaboration. Organization is unified and coherent. While there may be a few errors in mechanics, usage, or sentence structure, command of the language is apparent.

Mid-range papers. Papers in the middle range demonstrate engagement with the issue identified in the prompt but do not demonstrate the evidence of writing skill that would mark them as outstanding.

- 4 Competent.** These papers take a position on the issue defined in the prompt and support that position with some elaboration or explanation. Organization is generally clear. A competency with language is apparent, even though there may be some errors in mechanics, usage, or sentence structure.
- 3 Adequate.** These papers take a position on the issue defined in the prompt and support that position, but with only a little elaboration or explanation. Organization is clear enough to follow without difficulty. A control of the language is apparent, even though there may be numerous errors in mechanics, usage, or sentence structure.

Lower-range papers. Papers in the lower range fail in some way to demonstrate proficiency in language use, clarity of organization, or engagement of the issue identified in the prompt.

- 2 Weak.** While these papers take a position on the issue defined in the prompt, they may show significant problems in one or more of several areas, making the writer's ideas often difficult to follow: support may be extremely minimal; organization may lack clear movement or connectedness; or there may be a pattern of errors in mechanics, usage, or sentence structure that significantly interferes with understanding the writer's ideas.
- 1 Inadequate.** These papers show a failed attempt to engage the issue defined in the prompt, lack support, or the problems with organization or language are so severe as to make the writer's ideas very difficult to follow.

Level 6 Essay

Dear City Council:

The choice you are facing is a daunting one. The number of users of the public transportation system has been plummeting, and something must be done. Two options are on the table. The first one, reducing fares, is no doubt attractive. It will greatly benefit the lower and middle income customers who form the majority of your customer base. It will only produce marginal gains, however, in terms of overall ridership. The better option is the second one, increasing the frequency of trains and buses and expanding routes. This option will increase your customer base by making the public transportation system more convenient and reliable.

The principal hurdle for most people who choose not to use public transportation is convenience. Let's view the public transportation system from the perspective of the average working person. If time is money, then time spent waiting for trains and buses is money lost. Additionally, infrequent trains mean crowded trains, which can result in further delays as well as considerable inconvenience. The average working person wants to arrive at work well rested, ready to attack the work day. This just isn't possible if you've just spent the past hour standing in an overcrowded train jostled by the people around you, wondering if you're going to be late for work. Let's face it, given the hassles one faces on the public transportation system, it's much more convenient to drive or take a cab. Even if you get stuck in traffic, you still have a reasonable amount of space and privacy and might even be able to get a bit of work done during your trip to work.

The convenience factor doesn't apply just to working people. It applies to people who are going out for evenings. It applies to school children. It applies to parent running household errands. Society today runs at an exceptionally fast pace, and we are all trying to find ways to cut corners and buy a minute or two. This applies to people from all age groups and income levels. If the public transportation system can start helping us make our lives more efficient and convenient, then we will see a dramatic increase in ridership because more frequency of buses and trains will mean a more reliable system even if one bus or train is late or missing. People will be able to plan ahead, and their expectation that a bus or train will come very soon after they arrive at the bus stop or the subway station will be fulfilled. For new Yorkers, the reduction in the daily stress of commuting will be a great benefit.

Decreasing fares will not have the same impact. People who are forced to use the train for economic reasons will continue to use it for economic reasons. Those who drive or take cabs do so in spite of the cost. Money doesn't matter to them; convenience does. This doesn't mean that I'm not sympathetic to the notion of lowering fares. I am. It's just not a priority. In fact, there may be a way for us to have our cake and eat it too. If you adopt my proposal to increase ridership by providing more frequent trains and increasing the number of stops, we may be able to increase ridership to the point where the public transportation system begins to operate more efficiently. At this point, reducing fares might become feasible.

Sincerely,

Comments on Level 6 Essay

This exceptional essay takes a clear position on the issue described in the prompt and supports that position with the superior elaboration that deals with both the author's main points and the counterpoint effectively. The organization is clear and unified, and the language, in spite of some minor errors, is polished and persuasive.

Level 5 Essay

Dear City Council:

I understand that you want to encourage residents to use public transportation and that two proposals have been issued to get the attention of the people to use the subway or bus. The first plan, reducing subway and bus fares, may be enticing for some residents. The alternative plan, however, truly surpasses the first in terms of attractiveness by increasing reliability and allowing better time management. Improving service by providing more frequent trains and buses will ultimately do the most to encourage people to use public transportation.

Today, many people don't even consider using subways and buses for their transportation needs. People feel more comfortable riding in their cars or even like to walk. Other people are afraid to ride the buses and subways because they think the subway stops are uncomfortable and unsafe. The train stations are infested with rats, roaches, and even thrown trash. Additionally, there are many muggings that take place at train stations in early morning and late at night. By providing more frequent bus and subway service, people won't have to spend as much time in the train station. They won't have as much time to get disgusted with their surrounding. They'll also reduce the chance of getting mugged. The more frequent service will also make the public transportation more convenient. The more service we have, the more satisfied a person will be.

Time management is another reason why providing more frequent trains and buses will increase the use of mass transit. Today, many people have trouble getting to work and school on time when they use public transportation. Most employers and professors do not tolerate lateness and simply fine the tardy employee or dismiss the student from the day's lessons. Also, in many cases, the time schedule doesn't accommodate people's transportation needs. People are getting up much earlier than they should need to in order to get to work on time, then having to sit around for 30 minutes before they can begin work. Or, if they miss a train, they might wind up 30 minutes late. Adding more frequent service will ultimately suit the needs of these people by allowing them to arrive on time and to avoid wasting time.

I can't say that reducing fares is a bad idea. In fact, I'd be glad if I didn't have to pay as much as I do now. However, reducing fares, alone, doesn't encourage people to ride the subway or bus. People are far more concerned about arriving on time than they are about paying an extra \$.50 for a ticket. After all, what is \$.50 when someone might lose an hour's wage or get fired. That's why increasing the number of trains and buses will do the most to increase the number of people using public transportation.

I hope you take my reasons into full consideration when you are making your decision.

Comments on Level 5 Essay

The author of this paper takes a clear position on the issue and supports that position with moderate elaboration that presents his/her argument clearly and thoroughly. This organization is clear and effective: the author is able to move clearly from point to point and deals with the counterargument successfully. Language use is strong, though the author lacks the polished diction and command of sentence structures that are often characteristic of a 6.

Level 4 Essay

Dear City Council:

Although, providing more frequent subway and buses to encourage people to use community transportation sound like a great idea; it is not good enough to bring the commuters back to our main transportation. The option to reduce fares for subway and buses is a better choice. The prices went skyrocketing since the 90's and the commuters are running away from public transportation.

The city has increasing the fare almost every year. How can we keep up with the increase of the fares? It's almost impossible to use the public transportation, if the city doesn't do something quickly. For example, my cousin Anna decided last year, after the unbearable increase of the subway fare, to buy a bicycle to use in her daily transportation to work. She said that she could not take anymore. She's saving four dollars every day now. That's why people are getting so upset, the raise of fares doesn't keep up with our income.

If we take a closer look, we can see that the new fare is not fair at all. Around 1985, the price of round subway trip was about one-dollar-and-fifty cents. The year of 2003 marked the increase of subway round trip to four dollars, it's almost three-hundred per cent of increase. Do you think that the people who rides on the subway had this kind of increase in their salary? The answer is no, that's why subway and buses are getting so empty in these days. I beg to you Dear Council to lower fares on the mass transportation.

How can the city thinks about increasing more rides on the subway and buses, if we don't even have enough passengers for rides today. I repeat one more time, we can not keep using the public transportation with such a unmerable fare.

I strongly believe that the mass transportation is used by lower income people, at least more than fifty percent of the riders have to take the subway no matter what. Why can't the city give a break to those people, and lower the fare? The lower fare will bring people back to the mass transportation, and also will help lower income people to have a better life.

Comments on Level 4 Essay

This competent response takes a position on the issue defined in the prompt and remains focused on the criterion throughout. Three supporting points are offered, and the writer provides some elaboration for each of them. (The combination of personal anecdote—the story about Anna—and more conventional argument/analysis is a strength of this response.) Organization is generally clear, and a competency with language is apparent.

Level 3 Essay

Dear Council:

Hello! I am a well-known community worker who has heard about the two options that were given, one was to reduce the subway and bus fare and the other was to provide more frequent subway and bus service. Both sound very interesting but I agree with option #1 more. Only one can be put into effect.

I think reducing the subway and bus fare is a great idea. This will encourage more people to ride the subway and bus. People can get to places they want and also safe and secure. People would also love that they can go where ever for a low fare without having to spend a lot of money. Knowing they can ride the bus or subway would help the elderly and disabled. There would be no problems with the young children or school children. It would really be a great idea if we reduce the fare.

The second opinion is to provide more frequent subway and bus service. This will provide more buses and subway trains to come early or come to pick up extra people in bad weather during the bad weather. This option sounds good but option will bring a better way for people to get from A to point B in a short period of time. But I feel option one seems more accurate.

The reason I say option A is better is because if the fare is reduced 50% for the bus and subway everyone would love it. This will make the elderly want to travel more and the working people feel more important.

Everyone loves to travel so if you and a couple of friends wanted to go to the movies. They would get on the bus and pay a low fare. Then everywhere they go there would not be a problem.

In conclusion having the fare reduced will make the public feel like the metro transit authority really cares about the public.

Comments on Level 3 Essay

This response takes the position that reducing subway and bus fares is the more desirable option, and it provides a little elaboration for its supporting points. Organization is clear enough to follow without difficulty, although there is some repetition in the discussion. A basic control of language is apparent, though there are errors in usage and sentence structure.

Level 2 Essay

Dear City Council

Public transportation is a convenient resource for the urban community. Reducing fares can only make public transportation more convenient and more commuters will be encouraged to spend more time on bus and subway for less money.

More buses and subway cars are also convenient but they cost money. This may eventually lead to higher rates which leads to higher fares and discouraged commuters. Therefore I suggest that we reduce fares to a reasonable rate so that urban commuters are encouraged to use public transportation and our public transportation system is maintained. Thank you for your consideration.

Comments on Level 2 Essay

Score = 2: This paper takes a position on the issue defined in the prompt, but support is minimal. There are also problems with organizational coherence (see the first two sentences in paragraph 2). While the language errors do not prevent reader understanding, they are distracting.

Level 1 Essay

Dear Sir or Madam of the City Council.

The subways are dirty and smelly. On the buses there are broken glass everywhere. It's not safe to travel at night home.

To improve this problem we must have pride in our lives by keeping the subways clean; and ban any kind of drinks on buses. Have police and security guard at every bus stop and subway station.

Thank you from,

Comments on Level 1 Essay

Score = 1: This response fails to take a position on the issue, other than to say that buses are smelly and dirty. There is no logical progression of ideas and no coherent sense of organization. Language control is so poor that readers have difficulty following the author's train of thought. ("Have police and security guard at every bus stop and subway station.") The result is a paper that is deemed inadequate.

Strategies for Taking the CUNY Assessment Test in Writing

The CUNY Assessment Test in Writing is a 60-minute test that measures your ability to write a college-level essay. When taking the Writing Test, the following strategies may be helpful:

1. You need to know that in evaluating your essay, readers focus on four elements of your writing: taking a position on the issue identified in the question; supporting the position with evidence; organizing ideas; and using language that clearly conveys the writer's ideas.
2. The first choice you will be making is: which question do I want to write about? One asks you to write about a school-based issue, the other about a community-based issue. You will probably write a more effective essay if you choose the question you have more ideas and information about, or feel most comfortable with or interested in. Make this choice after reading both questions and thinking about them for a few minutes.
3. Completing this writing task successfully is in large part a function of how you use the allotted time. You may want to spend your time this way:
 - Planning and pre-writing:** Spend about 10 minutes planning. Your booklet gives you two blank pages for planning notes. Consider the position you are taking, a few good reasons for choosing the alternative you prefer, some evidence or explanation that support these reasons, some effective details you might include, and the order you might use to present your points most effectively.
 - Writing:** Spend about 40 minutes writing your essay, being sure to use the lined pages in the booklet. Refer to your plan, remembering that the task requires you to take a position, explaining your reasoning in some detail. You need also to consider the criterion specified so that your essay is convincing to the audience you are addressing. The language you choose should communicate your ideas clearly and appropriately.
 - Revising and editing:** Spend about 10 minutes reviewing your writing, adding or deleting as necessary and making any changes needed to enhance clarity.
4. Each question describes a situation involving a choice between two alternatives. You need to make clear the alternative you favor, offering a few good reasons for your choice and explaining your reasoning in some detail. That means that as you assert reasons for your choice, you should develop explanations for each, including such things as evidence, examples, or other suitable information. You are not required to discuss the other alternative, but if you chose to, you need to explain in some detail why you do not consider it as good a choice as the one you are supporting
5. Each question specifies an audience, such as a City Council or a college or school official. Be sure to address your response to that audience, and remember that the purpose of your writing is to convince your audience that you have chosen the better alternative and that your advice is persuasive.
6. Each question specifies a criterion for judgment which should guide your choice and your reasoning, for example: which alternative will best serve the community or which will enhance student life for the most students? Be sure to consider the criterion in your essay, so that your audience knows that you are not just thinking about the benefit to you:
 - for the community-based question, you might think about how your chosen alternative would affect different groups or what perspectives different people (such as old, young, male, female, parents, children) might have on the question.
 - for the school-based question, you might think about how your choice would benefit most students or different types of students (or even parents or teachers).