

## Praxis I: Writing: Study Goals and Tips

### General Information

The Praxis Writing test includes (essentially) two parts. In one part, you are given a writing prompt, usually a statement you must agree or disagree with, and your goal is to write a standard five-paragraph essay explaining your position within the 30-minute time limit.

- I. The writing prompt is challenging in several ways. First, writing even a short essay in 30 minutes is tough, and the pressure of the testing situation makes it even harder. Also, for the most part, when you have had to write papers, you have had time to revise and edit, and you have had access to resources to help you correct errors, both the automatic corrections in a word processing program like Microsoft Word, and resources such as a dictionary or grammar book. So this writing task is quite different from what you usually do (successfully) in college level courses. Further, the fact that you don't have the resources or the time to correct grammar and spelling errors means that such errors could deduct points from what might otherwise be a well-written paper. Finally, in your college writing, you may have been writing in a different format than the very traditional five-paragraph essay. For this test, I encourage students to aim to be as traditional as possible, rather than creative or daring. I'll go over my advice for success on this paper later on.
- II. The grammar questions are usually the greatest challenge. First, for the same reason as above—usually when we write, we have access to reference materials (or people) so that we can correct errors. I was an English major and love to write, but I know I still make some grammar errors or am still a little foggy on some grammar rules. Thus, I am careful to double-check my writing to watch out for such errors. If I were to prepare for this test, however, I would have to review grammar rules more closely so that I would have them memorized and fresh for the test. A good analogy might be the fact that while you are taking Algebra, you will have memorized the quadratic equation. Once you are done with such classes, you no longer have it memorized, but rather look it up when you need it. If you had to take a math test, though, you would take time to review and memorize that equation again. You must do the same in preparing for the grammar portion of this test. Another reason the grammar portion of the test is so tough, though, is that grammar is not taught as consistently or effectively as, say, Algebra. Educators debate the need to do so, and perhaps it makes sense to teach grammar only as part of the editing process of writing rather than a goal in itself—but the result is that for most students, the Praxis Writing test hits on grammar rules they never had to learn before. So in some of your preparation for this test, you are starting from scratch! Ouch! (And that's another reason I encourage students to give themselves enough time to review and prepare for this test, rather than think that one or two weeks of close study will be enough). I will talk more about tips for success in reviewing for this aspect of the test.

One comfort—the Praxis Writing test does not test your ability to name the parts of speech or master the 'vocabulary' of grammar, such as transitive verb, past participle, dependent clause, etc. (though sometimes you need familiarity with those topics in order to recognize errors). I think that is good news—your main goal is to learn to recognize errors. Not a bad goal, actually—that skill can help you in editing your own work and that of your students.

### Advice for Review

You will need to find a copy of a Praxis review book, such as Barron's *How to Prepare for the Praxis*, to study with on your own. You must become comfortable with the testing format—otherwise, you will have to move more slowly through the test just trying to figure out what they are asking you to do. You can get a copy of such review books by:

- 1) ASU Library (including one e-book you can check out on-line for 4 hours at a time)
- 2) The Department of Curriculum and Instruction has a limited number to check out to students.
- 3) Copy available for use *in* the University Writing Center
- 4) A friend who is now done with this test
- 5) Buy a copy from the bookstore
- 6) Used copies via an on-line bookseller

To prepare for the writing portion of the test, I recommend writing at least one sample paper per week, and then making an appointment with the writing center to get feedback on that paper. You need to correct it both in terms of organization and clarity AND in terms of correcting any grammar and spelling errors that may detract from your score. I also recommend going through the list of sample prompts (mine or others from your review book) and just coming up with your position and three reasons for each. I've had students comment to me that this kind of review was helpful, because after going through such a long list, they wind up having touched on, in some way at least, a prompt similar to the one they actually see on the test. Thus they save some time by already having some ideas of what to say. Once you come up with those reasons, though, I recommend discussing them with a friend, tutor or someone from the Writing Center. When I have discussed these answers with students, I sometimes identify reasons that are not different enough, or don't quite address the question. Through such discussions, you can gain a better sense of how to build a good argument.

Though your prep books will probably provide more than adequate information on this topic, I will also include a section going over my tips for writing a 5 paragraph essay that is likely to score higher on a standardized test.

To prepare for the multiple-choice questions, you need to review grammar rules. I highly recommend Diane Hacker's A Writer's Reference or A Pocket Style Manual. I also recommend Strunk & White's Elements of Style, which is completely online on Bartleby.com in case you can't find a copy in the library.

In working with these manuals, while it is helpful to read and study them, it is even more helpful to turn them into little self-quizzes. If you are working by yourself, you could pull out examples and create mini-tests to see if you can recognize what is correct. If you are working with a tutor or a friend, they could quiz you on different parts. I highly recommend that your aim should be to recognize errors—not correcting errors, because there are many ways to correct a grammatical error, so that is a different skill (and basically, allows you to rewrite the whole sentence to avoid dealing with that particular grammar rule, which won't help you recognize it on the real test).

At the same time, you need to keep working on sample tests from your test book, and discussing the ones you get wrong (and don't understand) with a friend, tutor or someone from the Writing Center. I believe that studying the grammar rules in a structured way while also working on the sample tests in the booklet will help you get prepare for this test.

### **How long will it take to prepare for this test?**

That may depend on you and your grammar skills thus far, plus your score on the test the first time. In general, I would recommend spending about a month (or so) of reviewing the rules and practicing writing and basically 'learning' what you need to know, and then spending an additional 2 weeks of daily, intense review right before you take the test. You want to go into the test as 'fresh' as possible with these grammar rules (many of which you may forget later on!).

Should you take a grammar class in the English department? Typically, the grammar class taught in the English department is too complex for what you need to learn—you need to learn or review the basics. There may be other writing classes in the English department or Communications department that may work for you, but you should talk to the professor to tell them your goals and see if it would be a good match. Independent study or working with the Writing Center and/or a tutor may be the best route.

### **Writing a traditional 5 paragraph essay that should score well on a standardized test...**<sup>1</sup>

#### **I. Step one: Choose a position.**

Do you agree or disagree with the statement? A little of both? Too bad—you have to pick a side and stick with it. You can sometimes modify slightly, explain your side within certain limits, but you must not seem to be arguing for both sides.

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<sup>1</sup> **Disclaimer:** *These guidelines were developed by Cama Duke (ASU, LAP). The tips have not come from ETS or any inside information from the ETS on how they score such essays. Ms. Duke developed the guidelines based upon her experience with preparing NC middle schoolers for the 7<sup>th</sup> grade standardized writing test.*

Sometimes, you will believe in one side, but you find it easier to argue for the opposing side. If so, fine—take the side that is easiest to argue. No polygraph test will be given ☺.

## II. Step two: Brainstorm arguments to support your position.

Most students I've worked with do it this way: they make a list of the first three reasons they can think of and run with them. I can see how this method makes sense, because you don't have much time, but getting faster at writing this essay should be part of why you are practicing it. You might try spending a few minutes on the prewriting/brainstorming step—here are 2 ways I like.

### a. **Method one: Listing** (an extended version of what most students do)

Write a long list of every possible reason or thought you have related to this topic. Then go through and identify the 3 best reasons. You may see places where you can combine reasons, or where some of your notes will work well as examples or support for one of your reasons. Thus this list serves as a kind of outline to help you write the paper, not just a short list of reasons.

You must do this quickly, though, and it may take practice. I think it would be a great idea to do a prewrite for every practice prompt you see, even if you only actually write a few full papers as practice.

### b. **Method two: Webbing**

I like this method, because it is visual, and sometimes seems more fun than just writing a list. You write your topic in the middle of your page, then branch out everything you can think about the topic from that center.

## III. Step Three: Write your paper.

Write an introduction, 3 paragraphs (one per reason), and a conclusion. I believe most students take this test on the computer, so the good news is you can skip around and rearrange, in case you prefer to write your introduction last, etc.

### a. **Introduction**

In a traditional essay, you introduce the topic itself in the first few sentences. Your final sentence of this paragraph must be your thesis statement. In your thesis statement, you must clearly state your position. You may also want to briefly summarize your three main reasons in this thesis statement as well.

Let's pretend that your writing prompt was: Teachers deserve higher salaries. Do you agree or disagree?

Surprisingly enough, as a former teacher, I agree with this statement ☺.

During my prewrite, I decided on the following three reasons:

- 1) the work of teachers is vital to the success of our society
- 2) teachers must complete extensive training to be certified as well as ongoing training, similar to other professionals who get paid much more (lawyers, for example)
- 3) Burnout is high in teaching, and we are facing a teaching shortage. It is too easy for good teachers to leave the profession for less stressful, higher paying jobs. Higher salaries would be an incentive to help teachers stay in the profession.

My **thesis statement** must include the following:

I believe that teachers deserve higher salaries.  
or... I agree that teachers deserve higher salaries.  
or... I strongly believe that teachers deserve higher salaries.

or another version ... but basically, your reader should be very clear on where you stand.

You may extend the thesis statement to refer to your three reasons. In traditional thesis statements, such reasons are almost always included. However, although I think you want to be traditional, sometimes the pressure of time during the test will make it hard for you to compose such a long thesis statement and still write the rest of the paper. Maybe the best plan would be to write that thesis statement in brief, then write

the rest of your paper, then when you have a few minutes left to edit, then add the three reasons.

Anyway, here is my extended version of the thesis statement, which took me a little while to compose, because my reasons were so wordy to start with... (but maybe that's me?)

I believe teachers deserve higher salaries, because of the value of their work, the high level of training required, and the shortage of good teachers.

Please note (since you are studying grammar rules, or should be) that my list is parallel—all nouns—value, level, shortage. Here's another version, with a parallel construction of clauses:

I believe teachers deserve higher salaries, because their work is so vital, they must complete extensive training, and they may burn out and find higher paying jobs elsewhere.

I prefer the noun version, because it's shorter, but it can be harder to compose than the second version. (Another little grammar lesson—I called the second version clauses, because each part could stand alone as a sentence, such as: Their work is so vital. They must complete extensive training. They may burn out and find higher paying jobs elsewhere.)

Your introduction and conclusion paragraphs should be about 3 sentences long. They do not have to be as long as the middle paragraphs (though it's okay if you are inspired to write more).

**b. Your body paragraphs (the three paragraphs explaining your three reasons)**

Any writing in between the introduction and conclusion is called the 'body' of your paper. In these paragraphs, you are making your case. While Hemingway and Faulkner did not have to worry about the length of their paragraphs in terms of being judged good writers, you do. I believe longer body paragraphs make a better impression on your readers. Aim for a minimum of 5 sentences for these paragraphs, and 6 or 7 would be even better.

*"But, you say, it is better to be succinct. Length of paragraph has nothing to do with quality of writing."*

My answer—oh, you thought we were talking about pure writing, writing as a creative, expressive activity. No, no, no--we're just talking about how you can score more points on this artificial writing assignment. Please feel free to ignore these rules for the rest of your writing life, okay? ☺

So, we want three paragraphs, one paragraph per reason. The first sentence of the paragraph should be a statement of your main reason. The rest of the paragraph should be support or elaboration for this reason. The final sentence can summarize your main point and perhaps lead into your next reason, the next paragraph.

**i. Ways to elaborate or support your reason:**

**1) Facts and/or Statistics**

*Example for my argument:* Education is vital to society:

Without an education, individuals are less likely to succeed, find meaningful work or contribute to society. Education helps people know how to make decisions for themselves, and even how to stay healthier and safe.

*If you know a statistic, or can estimate one, you could say* Studies have shown that internationally, women who receive an education are less likely to have children before they are ready to support them.

## 2) Examples

Just consider the main topics taught in our schools—reading, writing, math, science, and health. A student who learns how to read will have access to information throughout his or her life. Students who learn how to exercise regularly and choose healthy foods will be more likely to stay well, which means lower costs in health care or lost work days for businesses. (etc.)

## 3) An anecdote (one long, drawn out example)

Example: I had a friend who dropped out of school at age 16. The only job she could find was... etc. (you could write a long paragraph about this person, and the challenges she faced without an education. What if you don't know someone who would prove your point? Make one up (just don't exaggerate! Make it believable).

## 4) Compare/Contrast (perhaps showing how your side is superior to the opposing side)

Example: On average, people with a college education earn more than those who do not. People who have learned to read and write well are more successful in the work place than those who do not.

## 5) Cause and Effect (If..., then... )

Example: If we don't have a quality education available to all, then we will face serious problems as a society. *(I could then talk about the challenges or problems for people without an education versus the advantages of people having an education—a little bit like compare/contrast, actually, but based on that same cause & effect argument).*

## 6) Description and Details (sometimes you can make your case by really making the reader see what you mean).

Example: *In the classroom of an experienced, committed teacher, you may see many wonderful activities. Students may be working in groups to discuss a story they read and to create a project to help the rest of the class understand the story better. In the process, students gain insights into reading and communication skills, as well as how to get along with others. The teacher moves from group to group, giving pointers and encouragement. "Great job, Kelly," she might comment, "I like the way you are taking notes on the discussion." Her attention serves to teach the students what they need to learn, but also conveys the message that each one of them matters. What could be more important for our children than experiences like this one?*

## c. Conclusion

In general, I think a short and sweet conclusion is fine. Restate your thesis, maybe add some sweeping statements about how the world will be better if ... etc. My impression is that your body paragraphs are the most important ones in terms of length. However, a conclusion is still necessary to wrap everything up and give the reader a sense of closure.

### Other ways to improve/score more points for this paper:

- Good transitions between paragraphs
- Avoid repetition
- Avoid passive voice
- Try to get fast enough at writing this paper that you have time to reread it and catch any spelling, grammar or meaning errors. Most students make more of these due to the time limit/pressure of the testing situation. Leave yourself time to reread—possibly silently reading it aloud to yourself.