

CLEP® College Composition: at a Glance

Description of the Examination

The CLEP® College Composition examination assesses writing skills taught in most first-year college composition courses. Those skills include analysis, argumentation, synthesis, usage, ability to recognize logical development, and research. The exam cannot cover every skill (such as keeping a journal or peer editing) required in many first-year college writing courses. Candidates will, however, be expected to apply the principles and conventions used in longer writing projects to two timed writing assignments and to apply the rules of standard written English.

The College Composition examination contains multiple-choice items and two mandatory, centrally scored essays. Twice a month, the essays are scored by English faculty from throughout the country via an online scoring system. Each of the two essays is scored independently by two different readers, and the scores are then combined. This combined score is weighted approximately equally with the score from the multiple-choice section. These scores are then combined to yield the candidate's score. The resulting combined score is reported as a single scaled score between 20 and 80. Separate scores are not reported for the multiple-choice and essay sections. The College Composition examination contains approximately 50 multiple-choice items to be answered in 50 minutes and two essays to be written in 70 minutes, for a total of 120 minutes testing time.

Knowledge and Skills Required

The exam measures candidates' knowledge of the fundamental principles of rhetoric and composition and their ability to apply the principles of standard written English. In addition, the exam requires familiarity with research and reference skills. In one of their two essays for the exam, candidates must develop a position by building an argument in which they synthesize information from two provided sources that they must cite. The requirement that candidates cite the sources they use reflects the recognition of source attribution as an essential skill in college writing courses.

The skills assessed in the College Composition examination follow. The numbers preceding the main topics indicate the approximate percentages of exam questions on those topics. The bulleted lists under each topic are meant to be representative rather than prescriptive.

10% Conventions of Standard Written English

This section measures candidates' awareness of a variety of logical, structural, and grammatical relationships within sentences. The questions test recognition of acceptable usage relating to the items below:

- Syntax (parallelism, coordination, subordination)
- Sentence boundaries (comma splice, run-ons, sentence fragments)
- Recognition of correct sentences
- Concord/agreement (pronoun reference, case shift and number, subject-verb, verb tense)
- Diction
- Modifiers
- Idiom
- Active/passive voice
- Lack of subject in modifying word group
- Logical comparison
- Logical agreement
- Punctuation

40% Revision Skills

This section measures candidates' revision skills in the context of works in progress (early drafts of essays):

- Organization
- Evaluation of evidence
- Awareness of audience, tone, and purpose
- Level of detail
- Coherence between sentences and paragraphs
- Sentence variety and structure
- Main idea, thesis statements, and topic sentences
- Rhetorical effect and emphasis
- Use of language
- Evaluation of author's authority and appeal
- Evaluation of reasoning
- Consistency of point of view
- Transitions
- Sentence-level errors primarily relating to the conventions of standard written English

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25% Ability to Use Source Materials

This section measures candidates' familiarity with elements of the following basic reference and research skills, which are tested primarily in sets but may also be tested through stand-alone questions. In the passage-based sets, the elements listed under Revision Skills and Rhetorical Analysis may also be tested. In addition, this section will cover the following skills:

- Use of reference materials
- Evaluation of sources
- Integration of resource material
- Documentation of sources (including, but not limited to, MLA, APA, and Chicago manuals of style)

25% Rhetorical Analysis

This section measures candidates' ability to analyze writing. This skill is tested primarily in passage-based questions pertaining to critical thinking, style, purpose, audience, and situation:

- Appeals
- Tone
- Organization/structure
- Rhetorical effects
- Use of language
- Evaluation of evidence

The Essays

In addition to the multiple-choice section, the College Composition exam includes a mandatory essay section that tests skills of argumentation, analysis, and synthesis. This section consists of two essays, both of which measure a candidate's ability to write clearly and effectively. The first essay is based on the candidate's reading, observation, or experience, while the second essay requires candidates to synthesize and cite two sources that are provided. Candidates have 30 minutes to write the first essay and 40 minutes to read the two sources and write the second essay.

The essays must be typed on a computer.

First Essay: **Directions and Scoring Guidelines**

Directions: Write an essay in which you discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement provided. Support your discussion with specific reasons and examples from your reading, experience or observations.

Scoring Guidelines: Readers will assign scores based on the following scoring guide.

6 - A 6 essay demonstrates a high degree of competence and sustained control, although it may have a few minor errors.

A typical essay in this category

- addresses the writing task very effectively
- develops ideas thoroughly, using well-chosen reasons, examples, or details for support
- is clearly-focused and well-organized
- demonstrates superior facility with language, using effective vocabulary and sentence variety
- demonstrates strong control of the standard conventions of grammar, usage, and mechanics, though it may contain minor errors

5 - A 5 essay demonstrates a generally high degree of competence, although it will have occasional lapses in quality.

A typical essay in this category

- addresses the writing task effectively
- develops ideas consistently, using appropriate reasons, examples, or details for support
- is focused and organized
- demonstrates facility with language, using appropriate vocabulary and some sentence variety
- demonstrates consistent control of the standard conventions of grammar, usage, and mechanics, though it may contain minor errors

4 - A 4 essay demonstrates competence, with some errors and lapses in quality.

A typical essay in this category

- addresses the writing task adequately
- develops ideas adequately, using generally relevant reasons, examples, or details for support
- is generally focused and organized
- demonstrates competence with language, using adequate vocabulary and minimal sentence variety
- demonstrates adequate control of the standard conventions of grammar, usage, and mechanics; errors do not interfere with meaning

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3 - A 3 essay demonstrates limited competence.

A typical essay in this category exhibits ONE OR MORE of the following weaknesses:

- addresses the writing task, but may fail to sustain a focus or viewpoint
- develops ideas unevenly, often using assertions rather than relevant reasons, examples, or details for support
- is poorly focused and/or poorly organized
- displays frequent problems in the use of language, using unvaried diction and syntax
- demonstrates some control of grammar, usage, and mechanics, but with occasional shifts and inconsistencies

2 - A 2 essay is seriously flawed.

A typical essay in this category exhibits ONE OR MORE of the following weaknesses:

- addresses the writing task in a seriously limited or unclear manner
- develops ideas thinly, providing few or no relevant reasons, examples, or details for support
- is unfocused and/or disorganized
- displays frequent serious language errors that may interfere with meaning
- demonstrates a lack of control of standard grammar, usage, and mechanics

1 - A 1 essay is fundamentally deficient.

A typical essay in this category exhibits ONE OR MORE of the following weaknesses:

- does not address the writing task in a meaningful way
- does not develop ideas with relevant reasons, examples, or details
- displays a fundamental lack of control of language that may seriously interfere with meaning

0 - Off topic

- Provides no evidence of an attempt to respond to the assigned topic, is written in a language other than English, merely copies the prompt, or consists of only keystroke characters.

Second Essay: [Directions and Scoring Guidelines](#)

Directions: This assignment requires you to write a coherent essay in which you synthesize the two sources provided. Synthesis refers to combining the sources and your position to form a cohesive, supported argument. You must develop a position and incorporate both sources. You must cite the sources whether you are paraphrasing or quoting. Refer to each source by the author's last name, the title or by any other means that adequately identifies it.

Scoring Guidelines: Readers will assign scores based on the following scoring guide.

6 - A 6 essay demonstrates a high degree of competence and sustained control, although it may have a few minor errors.

A typical essay in this category cites sources appropriately and

- develops a position effectively and insightfully, using well-chosen reasons, examples, or details for support
- synthesizes* both sources effectively, with an effective and convincing link between the sources and the position
- is well focused and well organized
- demonstrates superior facility with language, using effective vocabulary and sentence variety
- demonstrates general mastery of the standard conventions of grammar, usage, and mechanics but may have minor errors

5 - A 5 essay demonstrates a generally high degree of competence, although it will have occasional lapses in quality.

A typical essay in this category cites sources appropriately and

- develops a position consistently, using appropriate reasons, examples, or details for support
- synthesizes both sources clearly, with a clear link between the sources and the position
- is generally well focused and well organized
- demonstrates facility with language, using appropriate vocabulary and some sentence variety
- demonstrates strong control of the standard conventions of grammar, usage, and mechanics but may have minor errors

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4 - A 4 essay demonstrates competence, with some errors and lapses in quality.

A typical essay in this category cites sources appropriately and

- develops a position adequately, using reasons, examples, or details for support
- synthesizes both sources adequately, with a link between the sources and the position
- is adequately focused and organized
- demonstrates competence with language, using adequate vocabulary and minimal sentence variety
- generally demonstrates control of the standard conventions of grammar, usage, and mechanics but may have some errors

3 - A 3 essay demonstrates limited competence.

A typical essay in this category exhibits ONE OR MORE of the following weaknesses:

- develops a position unevenly, often using assertions rather than relevant reasons, examples, or details for support
- synthesizes one source only, or two sources inadequately, or establishes an inadequate link between the source(s) and the position
- displays problems in citing sources: citations are confusing or incomplete
- is poorly focused and/or poorly organized
- displays frequent problems in the use of language
- demonstrates inconsistent control of grammar, usage, and mechanics

2 - A 2 essay is seriously flawed.

A typical essay in this category exhibits ONE OR MORE of the following weaknesses:

- is seriously underdeveloped, providing few or no relevant reasons, examples, or details for support
- synthesizes only one source weakly, or establishes a very weak link between the source(s) and the position
- does not cite any source
- is unfocused and/or disorganized

- displays frequent serious errors in the use of language that may interfere with meaning
- contains frequent serious errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics that may interfere with meaning

1 - A 1 essay is fundamentally deficient.

A typical essay in this category exhibits ONE OR MORE of the following weaknesses:

- does not develop a position
- fails to synthesize the source(s) used, or uses no sources at all
- contains severe writing errors that persistently interfere with meaning

0 - Off topic

- Provides no evidence of an attempt to respond to the assigned topic, is written in a language other than English, merely copies the prompt, or consists of only keystroke characters.

* For the purposes of scoring, synthesis refers to combining the sources and the writer's position to form a cohesive, supported argument.

Study Resources

Most textbooks used in college-level composition courses cover the skills and topics measured in the College Composition examination, but the approaches to certain topics and the emphasis given to them may differ. To prepare for the College Composition exam, it is advisable to study one or more college-level texts, such as readers, handbooks, and writing guides. When selecting a text, check the table of contents against the knowledge and skills required for this test.

To become aware of the processes and principles involved in presenting your ideas logically and expressing them clearly and effectively, you should practice writing. Ideally, you should try writing about a variety of subjects and issues, starting with those you know best and care the most about. Ask someone you know and respect to respond to what you write and help you discover which parts of your writing communicate effectively and which parts need revision to make the meaning clear. You should also try to read the works of published writers in a wide range of subjects, paying particular attention to the ways in which the writers use language to express their meaning.

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Sample Test Questions

The following sample questions do not appear on an actual CLEP examination. They are intended to give potential test-takers an indication of the format and difficulty level of the examination and to provide content for practice and review. For more sample questions and information about the test, see the *CLEP Official Study Guide*.

Conventions of Standard Written English (10%)

Directions: Read each sentence carefully, paying particular attention to the underlined portions. You will find that the error, if there is one, is underlined. Assume that elements of the sentence that are not underlined are correct and cannot be changed. In choosing answers, follow the requirements of standard written English.

If there is an error, select the one underlined part that must be changed to make the sentence correct.

If there is no error, select No error.

1. Improbable as it may seem when one observes
A B
its awkwardness on land, penguins are extremely
C D
graceful swimmers. No error
E

Revision Skills (40%)

Directions: The following passage is an early draft of an essay.

Read the passage and then answer the questions that follow. Some questions refer to particular sentences or parts of sentences and ask you to improve sentence structure or diction (word choice). Other questions refer to the entire essay or parts of the essay and ask you to consider the essay's organization, development, or effectiveness of language. In selecting your answers, follow the conventions of standard written English.

Questions 2–5 refer to the following passage.

(1) In observing a live performance such as a play or a stand-up routine, each individual member of the audience is affected by the group's emotional response to the show. (2) Some research shows that audience members are likely to laugh along with the laughter of others in the audience much more frequently than they would laugh at the same performance if viewing it alone.

(3) As performances moved to radio and television in the first half of the twentieth century, producers were well aware of the important role of this social laughter. (4) Early radio and television comedies were broadcast live with a real audience in the studio to provide the reactions that helped at-home audiences feel connected to the performance. (5) As advances in technology allowed performances to be prerecorded, edited, and enhanced for later broadcast, recorded laughter gained wider use. (6) It can be called "canned laughter" or a "laugh track."

(7) The laugh track gives producers the ability to create an audience response that aligns with the finished, edited performance. (8) In live broadcasts, the show is performed from beginning to end without stopping, and live studio audiences have an authentic, if unpredictable, response to the performance, just like that of audiences listening or watching at home. (9) In a recorded performance, though, directors are free to stop the scene, ask performers to redo a particular segment or have the crew switch equipment, and start again. (10) This interrupted, disjointed style of performance makes it difficult for them to hold a live studio audience's interest. (11) Therefore, editors often add recorded laughter into the final edited version of the program. (12) Highlighting each joke with just the right volume, duration, and quality of laughter to prompt audiences at home to laugh at the intended times. (13) Although some contemporary television comedies do not use a laugh track, many programs for children and adults alike rely on recorded laughter to create a sense of audience participation.

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2. Which of the following, if inserted immediately before sentence 1, would make the best introduction to the passage?
- There are actually scientists who study human laughter.
 - The laughter you hear on many television comedies was probably prerecorded.
 - The technology used to produce radio and television programs has advanced rapidly.
 - Many people believe that comedy is less meaningful than drama, but both can evoke strong emotional responses.
 - Shared laughter has a powerful influence on an audience's relationship to a performance.
3. In context, which of the following is the best revision to the underlined portion of sentence 2 (reproduced below)?
- Some research shows that audience members are likely to laugh along with the laughter of others in the audience much more frequently than they would laugh at the same performance if viewing it alone.*
- However, some
 - Nonetheless, some
 - In contrast, some
 - In fact, some
 - Conversely, some
4. Which of the following is the best way to combine sentences 5 and 6 (reproduced below)?
- As advances in technology allowed performances to be prerecorded, edited, and enhanced for later broadcast, recorded laughter gained wider use. It can be called "canned laughter" or a "laugh track."*
- As advances in technology allowed performances to be prerecorded, edited, and enhanced for later broadcast, recorded laughter gained wider use; it can be called "canned laughter" or a "laugh track."
 - As advances in technology allowed performances to be prerecorded, edited, and enhanced for later broadcast, recorded laughter — called "canned laughter" or a "laugh track" — gained wider use.
 - As advances in technology allowed performances to be prerecorded, edited, and enhanced for later broadcast, recorded laughter, they call it "canned laughter" or a "laugh track," which then gained wider use.
 - As advances in technology allowed performances to be prerecorded, edited, and enhanced for later broadcast, "canned laughter" or a "laugh track" gained wider use; this is recorded laughter.
 - As advances in technology allowed performances to be prerecorded, edited, and enhanced for later broadcast, recorded laughter having gained wider use, called "canned laughter" or a "laugh track."
5. In context, which of the following is best to do with sentence 12 (reproduced below)?
- Highlighting each joke with just the right volume, duration, and quality of laughter to prompt audiences at home to laugh at the intended times.*
- Insert a comma after "laughter" and change "to prompt" to "prompting."
 - Add "with the performance" at the end of the sentence.
 - Add it to the end of sentence 11, using a comma before the word "highlighting."
 - Delete it from the passage.
 - Leave it as it is.

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Ability to Use Source Materials

Directions: The following questions test your familiarity with basic research, reference, and composition skills. Some questions refer to passages, while other questions are self-contained. For each question, choose the best answer.

Questions 6–7 [APA Style]

Cramton, D., & Hinds, P. J. (2005). Subgroup dynamics in internationally distributed teams: ethnocentrism or cross-national learning. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 26, 231–263.

6. The citation shown refers to
 - A. a chapter in a book
 - B. a conference paper
 - C. a newspaper editorial
 - D. an essay in an anthology
 - E. a journal article
7. In the citation shown, “26” refers to the
 - A. volume number of *Research in Organizational Behavior*
 - B. number of individual works in *Research in Organizational Behavior*
 - C. the number of times the cited work was retrieved from the Internet
 - D. page that “Subgroup dynamics in internationally distributed teams: ethnocentrism or cross-national learning” begins on
 - E. approximate number of pages in “Subgroup dynamics in internationally distributed teams: ethnocentrism or cross-national learning”

Rhetorical Analysis (25%)

Directions: The following questions test your ability to analyze writing. Some questions refer to passages, while other questions are self-contained. For each question, choose the best answer.

Questions 8–10 refer to the following passage.

(1) There was a steaming mist in all the hollows, and it had roamed in its forlornness up the hill, like an evil spirit, seeking rest and finding none. (2) A clammy and intensely cold mist, it made its slow way through the air in ripples that visibly followed and overspread one another, as the waves of an unwholesome sea might do. (3) It was dense enough to shut out everything from the light of the coach-lamps but these its own workings, and a few yards of road; and the reek of the labouring horses steamed into it, as if they had made it all. (4) Two other passengers, besides the one, were plodding up the hill by the side of the mail. All three were wrapped to the cheekbones and over the ears, and wore jack-boots. (5) Not one of the three could have said, from anything he saw, what either of the other two was like; and each was hidden under almost as many wrappers from the eyes of the mind, as from the eyes of the body, of his two companions.

8. Which of the following pairs of literary devices appears in sentence 1?
 - A. Alliteration and onomatopoeia
 - B. Metaphor and juxtaposition
 - C. Personification and simile
 - D. Irony and paradox
 - E. Point of view and stream of consciousness

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9. Which of the following best summarizes the meaning of sentence 5 (reproduced below)?
- Not one of the three could have said, from anything he saw, what either of the other two was like; and each was hidden under almost as many wrappers from the eyes of the mind, as from the eyes of the body, of his two companions.*
- A. Even though the passengers were friends, none of them knew how the others were feeling.
 - B. Two of the passengers were attempting to conceal what they knew from the third passenger.
 - C. The dense fog made it hard for the coachman to keep track of the passengers.
 - D. None of the passengers could discern the appearance or character of the other two passengers.
 - E. All of the passengers had witnessed something they were afraid of but could not discuss with each other.
10. The overall mood of the passage can best be described as
- A. ominous
 - B. melancholy
 - C. nostalgic
 - D. depressing
 - E. serene

Credit Recommendations

The American Council on Education has recommended that colleges grant six credits for a score of 50, which is equivalent to a course grade of C, on the CLEP College Composition exam. Each college, however, is responsible for setting its own policy. For candidates with satisfactory scores on the CLEP College Composition examination, colleges may grant credit toward fulfillment of a distribution requirement, or for a particular course that matches the exam in content. Check with your school to find out the score it requires for granting credit, the number of credit hours granted, and the course that can be bypassed with a passing score.

Answers to Sample Questions: 1-C; 2-E; 3-D; 4-B; 5-C; 6-E; 7-A; 8-C; 9-D; 10-A