

PART THREE

WRITING PROMPTS

How to Read and Analyze a Writing Prompt

Most state tests include a writing section with one or more writing prompts. Most prompts provide you with a topic for writing and give specific suggestions for how to get started. They will usually identify the type of writing you are to do and the audience for which you should write. The formats of writing prompts vary. Prompts may ask questions, tell you to respond to a quotation, challenge you with an opinion, or set up a hypothetical situation.

Here is an example of a persuasive writing prompt:

Your state is considering a new policy that would require a young person to perform a certain number of hours of volunteer work before he or she can graduate. What do you think? Write a letter to the editor of your school newspaper stating your opinion about this issue and supporting it with convincing reasons.

Steps for Reading and Analyzing a Prompt

STEP 1 Read the prompt once or twice. Then determine your audience. Who is your reader? If your audience is not stated directly, assume that it is the general adult population.

STEP 2 Decide on your topic. What is the key idea or opinion that the prompt wants you to discuss?

STEP 3 Look for cue words. Not every prompt will have a label telling what kind of writing is expected. Look for words that indicate your task or purpose. (See the chart below.)

Type of Prompt	Prompt Cue Words	Task or Purpose for Writing
Informational	<i>explain what, how, or why</i>	Give facts, ideas, or other kinds of information on a topic, or explain how to do something.
Persuasive	<i>convince, persuade, or defend</i>	Take a point of view on an issue, and provide reasons and evidence that support your opinion.
Narrative	<i>tell, retell, recall, or remember</i>	Tell about or recall a meaningful event. Include interesting and specific details, dialogue, and characters to express your ideas.

STEP 4 Identify your task or purpose for writing. How will you address the topic in your response? Does the prompt tell you to write an essay or another form of writing?

Once you figure out who your audience is and what your topic and purpose for writing are, you can use the writing process (prewriting, writing, revising, and publishing) and the six traits to prepare and polish your response.

Expository Writing Prompts for Practice

Remember, **expository writing prompts will ask you to explain something.** Use the writing process and the six traits to prepare responses to these prompts. Write your responses on your own paper. Use the rubrics on pp. 20–21 to evaluate your responses.

Practice Prompt 1:

Most states require that young people stay in school at least until age sixteen. The laws are supposed to keep students in school long enough to get the education they need to survive as adults. What are the benefits and what are the drawbacks of such laws for students, their families, and their communities? Write an expository report for your teacher in which you discuss the pros and cons of the laws. Make sure your discussion is balanced and informative, not persuasive. Draw on personal experiences as well as from information from books, the Internet, and other media.

Practice Prompt 2:

Every family has a different attitude toward education. What is your family's attitude? Why does your family feel that way? How does their attitude affect the way you feel about and perform in school? How does it shape your own ambitions as a student? Write an expository piece to be included in your school newspaper in which you talk about three causes or effects of your family's attitude toward education. Use examples from real life as well as from your readings and from the media.

Practice Prompt 3:

Nineteenth-century French novelist Gustave Flaubert once wrote that "Success is a consequence and must not be a goal." Write an expository essay that explains what Flaubert meant in this quotation. You may use examples from real life, books, movies, or television.

(Expository Writing Prompts continued)

Practice Prompt 4:

Think about the qualities of a hero. Literature is full of characters that are called heroes, but do they match your criteria? Select two characters from stories, plays, or novels you have read recently, on your own or for school. In your expository essay, define the concept of hero and explain how the two characters are—or are not—heroes, according to your criteria. Be sure to provide supporting examples and evidence from the literature and from real life to support your ideas.

Practice Prompt 5:

What is good literature? The number of book reviewers in the world suggests that few people can agree on what a good book is. In an expository essay, explain your ideas about good literature and support them by providing examples from novels, stories, plays, or poems you have read for school or on your own. Make sure that you explain your ideas clearly and include literary examples that back them.

Practice Prompt 6:

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote “When there is a choice about it, a great sacrifice is preferable to a small sacrifice, because we compensate ourselves for a great one with self-admiration, which is not possible with a small one.” In an expository essay, explain what Nietzsche is saying about making sacrifices. Provide examples from real life, literature, and other media in your response.

Persuasive Writing Prompts for Practice

Persuasive writing prompts will ask you to express an opinion or point of view about an issue and support it with strong reasons. Use the writing process and the six traits to prepare responses to these prompts. Write your responses on your own paper. Use the rubrics on pp. 20–21 to evaluate your responses.

Practice Prompt 1:

Your state's university system is deciding to make the college admissions process simpler for high school seniors. Instead of requiring students to write and submit essays, the colleges will base admission solely on a student's grade point average. Anyone with a grade point average of 3.8 is automatically accepted to the state university. Is this idea a good one? Is it fair? Write a persuasive letter to your state representative in which you take a position on this issue and support it with three good reasons.

Practice Prompt 2:

Some high schools in your state are deciding to place students on tracks—one for students planning to go to college, and one for students who will enter the workforce immediately after graduating from high school. Do you think this plan is a good one? Is it fair? Write a persuasive article to the editor of your local newspaper in which you state a position on the issue and support it with reasons and evidence from personal experience and the media.

Practice Prompt 3:

The construction of a much-needed addition to your high school is being held up because artifacts of historical importance may have been found on the property. The delay may last up to a year while archaeologists study the site. Meanwhile the high school continues to fill up with students. What is your opinion on this issue? Write a persuasive piece that you will present to the school board in which you give an opinion and support with reasons.

Persuasive Writing Prompts continued

Practice Prompt 4:

Read the statement below made by English philosopher John Stuart Mill (1826–1872):

War is an ugly thing, but not the ugliest of things: the decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks nothing worth a war, is worse...

Do you agree or disagree with Mill's stance on war? In a persuasive essay to present to your English teacher, give an opinion that supports or challenges Mill's viewpoint. Give reasons that support your opinion. You may use examples from real life, literature, and the media to support your ideas.

Practice Prompt 5:

Read the definition below from American writer Ambrose Bierce (1842–1914).

Education. That which discloses to the wise and disguises from the foolish their lack of understanding.

Do you agree or disagree with Bierce's definition of education? Write a persuasive essay in which you support or challenge his point of view and give reasons that back up your opinion. Use examples from real life, literature, and the media.

Practice Prompt 6:

Think of an issue that is currently under discussion in the media today. Where do you stand on this issue? Write a persuasive report to share with your peers in which you identify the issue and express an opinion about it. Give reasons that support your opinion and use examples from real life, literature, and the media.

Narrative Writing Prompts for Practice

Narrative writing prompts will ask you to recall an experience. Use the writing process and the six traits to prepare responses to these prompts. Write your responses on your own paper. Use the rubrics on pp. 20–21 to evaluate your responses.

Practice Prompt 1:

Think of an important event or incident in your life. What lesson did you learn from it? Write a well-developed personal narrative that describes the experience and reveals why it was important to you. Imagine that your audience is on the admissions board for a college you wish to attend. Select an event that you feel comfortable sharing with readers.

Practice Prompt 2:

Has your understanding of someone you know ever changed? Think of someone you understand better now than when you first knew him or her. Then write a personal narrative in which you tell how and why your view of this person changed. Be sure to tell why the person is meaningful to you and what happened to your feelings toward this person. Be sure to select a person and event that you feel comfortable sharing with readers.

Practice Prompt 3:

Conflicts often force us to think deeply about our feelings, relationships, and beliefs. Resolving a conflict requires us to grow and act in a mature fashion. Think of a conflict that caused you to reflect on your life and caused you to grow. In a personal narrative, tell what this conflict was and how it affected you. Make sure your narrative tells why the conflict was significant. Be sure to select a conflict that you feel comfortable sharing with readers.

Narrative Writing Prompts continued

Practice Prompt 4:

The natural world has inspired many writers to reconsider their places in the universe. American writers such as Henry David Thoreau and Annie Dillard have used their encounters with nature to illuminate their thoughts about their lives. Has nature ever inspired you to make a life changing decision or to reevaluate your life? In a personal essay, tell about that event or decision and the role nature played in it. Your narrative should make clear why the event or decision was important or significant. Choose an event you won't mind others reading about.

Practice Prompt 5:

High school is a place where young people start to realize their strengths and talents. What are yours? Think of an episode from your high-school years in which you realized that you had a specific strength or talent. In a well-written personal narrative, retell the events of that episode. Use dialogue and sensory details to make the experience come alive for readers. Make sure your readers understand what you learned and how you changed during the experience. Choose an experience you feel comfortable sharing with others.

Practice Prompt 6:

Everyone has a hero. He or she may be a family member, a teacher, a sports star, or a public figure. Think of a person whom you consider a hero—someone who inspires you to be great. In a well-written narrative, describe how this person came to be your hero. Make sure that your readers understand why you admire your subject so much.