

The CUNY Skills Assessment Program  
Office of Assessment • The City University of New York



## The CUNY/ACT Writing Sample

**The CUNY/ACT Writing Sample** is a 60 minute essay test in which students are required to respond to a prompt that is presented at the time of testing. The Writing Sample is a direct assessment of students' writing skills. Students are presented a choice of two questions, or prompts in response to which they will be asked to write an organized, focused essay. The questions will include information about a decision that must be made by a group of people. The group must decide between two alternatives. The writer is asked to advise the group on the best choice and explain why the group should agree with the writer's position. In addition, the questions will specify the basis upon which the decision must be made. The Writing Sample is scored by two trained readers, using a six-point scale. The passing score is a total score of 7 or more. An example of the writing assignment, the scoring guide used by readers to rate essays, sample papers for each score point, and some tips on taking the Writing Sample Test prepared by CUNY writing faculty follow.

### An Example of a CUNY/ACT Writing Sample Assignment

The question below is an example of the kind of question that students will be given for the CUNY/ACT Writing Sample. 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 Parks Board in a large city has received a generous donation and wants to use the donation to benefit the city as a whole. The Board is considering two options, but there is only enough funding for one. One option is to improve the city's parks by planting more flower gardens and creating more recreational areas. The other option is to improve the overall appearance of the city by planting flower beds and small trees along city streets and at intersections. Write a letter to the Parks Board in which you argue for improving the city's parks or for improving the appearance of the city, explaining how your choice will benefit the city as a whole. Begin your letter: Dear Parks Board:*

**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 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.

## The CUNY/ACT 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.

## Sample Student Essays

### Level 6 Essay

Dear Park Board:

Last night as I was watching the news, I learned that our city has received a grant to benefit the people in the city by improving its appearance. Both of these proposals are exciting for the city and both would contribute a great deal to achieving the goal. However, I think the people who live in New York will derive the greatest benefit from using the money to enhance the city's public parks.

I cannot be argued that the city's streets and intersections are already attractive and that improving their appearance is not needed. Would that it were so. However, my fear is that if the city were to use the grant to place trees and flowerbeds around the city, the city would not be able to properly care for them. While improving the city's parks will require funding for maintenance, as well, at least there are fewer locations that the Parks Board must maintain than if new trees and flowerbeds were scattered around the city. I am also concerned about how the city's residents might treat the new trees and flowering plants if they were located all over the city. People are very likely to throw garbage into flowerbeds or to pick flowers to decorate their own dining room tables. It is true that people can similarly abuse trees and flowerbeds in the parks, but at least there is some supervision in most parks, and more people watching what others do, and this would reduce the degree to which people could mistreat the city's improvements.

Even though enhancing the city's streets and intersections would improve the appearance of the city, I think improving the city's parks will have a more positive effect on people's lives. Urban residents have a great need of

green spaces and visit them for many purposes. For example, many people like to exercise in the city's parks, so improving the recreational facilities in the parks would be beneficial. Many people can't afford to belong to expensive health clubs, or they just prefer to exercise in the fresh air. The sight of people walking, jogging, biking or playing games such as basketball or football in our parks is a familiar one, especially if one visits a park early in the morning or in the evening. If parks do not have suitable facilities for these activities, then people may resort to using the city's busy streets and risking injury. The city would therefore greatly benefit its residents by enhancing facilities in the parks for these activities.

The parks in a large city like New York also provide some relief from the noise and motion that surrounds us. Everyone needs to escape sometimes from the stress of living in the city, and going to a park is refreshing and relaxing. While many people exercise in the parks, others seek the tranquility of a park to enjoy a quiet walk, to read, to picnic with family members, or just to sit on a bench and feed the birds or gaze into space. These more contemplative people would enjoy wandering through a beautiful park with colorful and fragrant flowerbeds that the city could plant with grantfunding.

In conclusion, I believe that investing in the city's parks is an investment in the well-being of our citizens, whatever use they may make of the city's parks. Either of these options will provide a benefit to the people who live in New York, but I hope the Parks Board will decide that the greater good is to improve the parks.

Sincerely,

### **Comments on Essay 6**

This paper has clear organization with good transitions. Language use is excellent, with good control of complex sentences, good sentence variety, and precise word choice. The writer takes a clear position in the introduction in this paper, although the introduction is a little weak because the writer refers to "both of these proposals" without saying what they are. However, the writer compensates for this weakness by providing extensive development of his ideas about how improving the parks will benefit both people who like to use parks for recreation and for people who like to visit them for quiet relaxation. Other papers in the Information Booklet briefly discuss why the option the writer did not choose is less important, but this writer does a much better job (in the second paragraph) offering several reasons and good details to explain why he did not choose the other option.

### **Level 5 Essay**

Dear Parks Board,

I am a resident of the highly urbanized district in Midtown Manhattan. Recently, I have been advised of the certain funds donated to our city, aiming to benefit it as whole. There are two options of the funds application being debated by the Board, one being a plan to establish more recreational areas and increase the amount of flower gardens in the existing parks. Another proposal suggests a wider improvement of the city appearance by planting flower beds and trees along the streets and intersections. The latter appears to be the best way to benefit the city and its dwellers, and I would like to argue in its support.

Investing the money in improving the overall look of the city is undoubtedly a far-seeing and effective undertaking. The appearance of a great number of green plants on the streets will be noticeable, and therefore, greatly appreciated by the city's people, unlike improving the parks, which in the current hectic environment are not the most popular places. We spend a great part of our time rushing in the streets, walking through the busy traffic and standing in crowded lines. Having small oases of green in the streets will decorate them and make them look more pleasant to the eye.

It is a common and indisputable notion, that the city air is bad due to its contamination. Small trees and bunches of flowers in the streets assist in purifying the air. The effect is not immense, but it helps to improve the situation. The more plants there are in the city, the healthier its residents are. Statistics shows incredible health rates in such seemingly dangerously urbanized cities as Paris, Prague, Luxembourg, where a great number of trees is spread around the living areas.

Having significant particles of nature present in the heart of the city also has a great meaning for us busy residents. Nowadays, we are always in such a rush, so vital to survive in the world, that we do not really possess the time to go to the park for recreation. For the above reasons, the plants on the street will have more positive effect on common members of the city community.

Improving the city's look mainly serves a decorative purpose. But it is highly cost efficient as well. People tend to choose the areas of residence that has not only all conveniences, but also nice appearance and joyful view that the flowers provide. By planting flower beds in certain districts, we might benefit investing the real estate business bringing profit to the city itself. People looking for an apartment even in the most urbanized area like mine, seek for something that would make it look better and tidier.

For all of the above reasons, I would eagerly like to support the plan to plant trees and flower beds along the streets. Please thoroughly review all the considerations.

Sincerely,

### **Comments on Essay 5**

This writer uses some repetition of the prompt in the introduction to provide context for her position. The paper develops three different points with good detail, so the reader can clearly understand how the writer thinks improving the appearance of the city will benefit its busy residents. The writer also addresses the other option at different points in the paper. Even though her discussions of the other option could be improved, the reader can gain some understanding of why the writer thinks that improving the appearance of the city's streets is more beneficial than improving the city's parks. The organization of the paper is clear, although there is a mistake in the fourth paragraph, where the writer's intention is not clear. A reader may wonder whether this paragraph is an extension of the earlier argument that the improved appearance of the city's streets will benefit busy residents, an attempt to address why the other option is less important, or an attempt to present another supporting point. While there are some mistakes that suggest the process of second language acquisition (errors in subject-verb agreement, usage, syntax, and articles), there is also good control of some complex sentences, and there is good sentence variety, showing overall command of the language.

### **Level 4 Essay**

Dear Parks Board:

I have been informed that our city has received a generous fund to be used to benefit the city as a whole. As a resident of this city, I am honored to give a voice to our city's need. Two proposals have been made; either to improve the city's parks by planting flower gardens and create more recreational areas or to improve the overall appearance of the city by planting flower beds and small trees along the city streets. I believe that both proposals have the same goal in enhancing the city, but there is only enough money to fund one proposal. I strongly favor for improving the appearance of the city, because it will make the city look better, create a new look to the city, and it will reduce the unemployment rate of the city.

Although creating more recreational areas would satisfy those families who like to travel and entertainment, but it wouldn't benefit the city as a whole. Enhancing the appearance of the city would make the residents feel comfortable. People who walk on the streets where there are flower beds of different kinds of flowers would enjoy their walk. They would not feel tired, even though they have walked a long journey. These flower beds would entertain these pedestrians on their journey. It would do the same thing to those people who drive. People coming from out of town and being welcomed by flowerbeds and beautiful trees would be amazed and feel welcomed. These drivers would have a nicer view while they are on the road. Planting more trees along streets and intersections would actually provide more oxygen. This would be a benefit for their health. More trees; more oxygen.

Planting flower beds and trees would create a new look to our city. If those flower beds and trees are cut and shaped nicely, it would attract people who passed. For example, the flower beds can be shaped as a welcome greeting on our city's border or at an airport. It would look beautiful. These flower beds would not only attract people, it would attract insects, such as butterflies, bees, etc. The honey of the flowers would provide these insects as their food.

Planting flower beds and adding more trees along our city's roads is not an easy job. It would need a lot of people involved to finish this project. First, it would need a city planner who will plan where to plant the flowers and how big of space it will take. It needs a big space of land to plant flowerbeds. Then you would need to hire gardeners who will take care of the flowers and trees. They would be the one who shape, cut, and water the flowers and trees. It needs a good caring, so that the flowers won't die. All these people who work for the city would cause a decline in the unemployment rate.

Overall, improving the appearance of this city would benefit the city as a whole, rather than creating more recreational parks. It would benefit the city socially and economically. Thank you for your time in reading my letter, I hope you take my suggestion into consideration.

Sincerely,

## Comments on Essay 4

While the first paragraph of this paper includes extensive repetition of the prompt, the information is interwoven into the writer's introduction to provide context for the writer's position. In general, development of ideas is good. In the second paragraph, the writer includes three different ways the improved appearance of the city would affect people and briefly discusses each one. In the fourth paragraph, the writer does a good job of explaining how choosing this alternative would benefit the city by providing jobs. However, the writer does make some mistakes. For example, he mentions the other option at the beginning of the second paragraph, but does not develop the point, so the reader is left wondering how that option would benefit people who like to travel and why that option is less important. The other mistake is in the third paragraph, where the detail just adds to ideas in the second paragraph; therefore, the writer should have considered combining the two paragraphs. In spite of this lapse in organizing the paper, overall the organization is clear, and the writer does a pretty good job of using transitions to connect and separate points. Language use is competent, and there is some sentence variety; but the writer could have combined some sentences for greater conciseness. And there are a number of errors in verb forms, word choice, usage, and syntax.

## Level 3 Essay

Dear Parks Board:

It is to my understanding a Parks Board in a large city has received a substantial donation, and wants to use the donation to benefit the city as a whole. The Board is considering two options. One is improving the city's parks by planting more flower gardens and creating more recreational parks. The second option is by planting flower beds and small trees along city streets and at intersections. I strongly agree in improving the city's parks by planting more flower gardens and creating more recreational parks. It will enhance the beauty of the city and the children in the neighborhood will have more parks to play in.

The majority of the children in the neighborhood do not have adequate parks to play in. For example, we only have one park in our neighborhood, and the swings are all broken. Many of the parents in the area have been complaining about the deterioration of the park. So what the parents have been doing is getting together to entertain the children. We have been rotating to each others homes to make it more fun. The most we can do is gather all of their games and play with the children. It would be very nice and enjoyable, for the children to have more than one park. For our neighborhood this is a pressing issue for the children, as well as the parents.

Another reason why it would be feasible for the Park Board to improve the city parks. The flowers we did have planted around the park have been uprooted, all of the flower gardens are now destroyed. The beauty we once had in the city park has deteriorated. This is why there is a need for the Park Board to build up the City Parks.

Also the parents in the area has volunteered to help up keep the parks. For our children to have a rehabilitated and beautiful neighborhood, we the parents would like the Park board to consider our suggestion.

Therefore, Park Board, yes it would be nice for nice flower beds and small trees along our city streets. But I strongly favor the recreational parks and flower gardens would enhance our city. I hope you will consider my suggestion. Our children will also have a fun and enjoyable atmosphere.

## Comments on Essay 3

Although the introduction includes extensive repetition of the prompt, it does provide some context for the writer's discussion of the issue. The middle of the paper includes two supporting points. The first of these is nicely developed with some detail about parents who have attempted to compensate for the lack of a good neighborhood park where their children can play. The second point, however, while presented with a little detail (parks are not attractive because "flowers...have been uprooted"), is much less well developed, and the detail does not develop the idea in the paragraph's opening sentence ("why it would be feasible for the Park Board to improve the city parks"). The organization of the paper is generally clear enough to follow without difficulty, though the reader may be confused about the writer's intent in the fourth paragraph. Here, the reader may wonder whether the writer intended to introduce another point, or whether this paragraph is the first part of a two-paragraph conclusion. The language, though flawed by a fragment and comma splice in the fourth paragraph and by a number of errors in spelling, punctuation, word choice, and grammar, shows a basic control, and errors do not impede understanding.

## Level 2 Essay

Dear Parks Board,

My understanding is that the city has received a generous donation. The money is to be used to benefit the city as a whole. I feel that the money should be used to improve the overall appearance of the city by planting flower beds and small trees along the city streets and intersections. That idea will truly benefit the city as a whole.

The city is a overpopulated and not so pleasant place. Not many trees are around netherless flowers. Because of that, the city does not look like a very pleasant place to live in. Like many others I two live in a city whear trees and flwers on the trees are not a common thing.

If more small trees and flower beds are planted along the city streets then, people will feel more conftrouble to live in are city. The streets will look helthier and cleaner. Also more people will feel attractked to come to the city. That is how the city will benifit as a whole.

I will be very pleased if you agree with the idia of planting small trees and flower beds along the streets and intersections of the city. By doing so it will truely benefit the city as a whole.

Sincerely,

### Comments on Essay 2

The writer takes a position and uses a problem/solution approach to structuring the paper (e.g., the city is overpopulated and unpleasant, so the city should improve its appearance by planting more trees and flowers along the streets). The paper has a clear beginning, middle, and ending, showing an understanding of how to shape ideas for this kind of assignment. The writer briefly develops each part of the paper, but there is very little explanation of supporting points, and this explanation is general and repetitious. A reader may especially notice repetition of the idea that the city is not a pleasant place to live and of the phrase from the prompt “planting flower beds and small trees.” The language presents a writer who has a basic understanding of English sentence structure, but the paper has a number of errors (e.g., spelling and punctuation errors, and missing articles).

## Level 1 Essay

Dear Parks Board:

I am a inhabitant of New York City. I have written this letter to communicate you my opion about what option for improving the city’s parks or for improving the appearance of the city benefit the city. I agree to improve the city’s parks by planting more flower garden and creation more recreationals area.

One of the reason is I have two children. Where I am living my children don’t have recreational area to enjoy a good moment. The need some areas to do their activities.

### Comments on Essay 1

The writer takes a position on the issue defined in the prompt and provides one supporting reason for her position (children need a place “to do their activities”). However, this is the only point, and there is no development of the point, so readers are left wondering about where the author’s children play now and why a park is so badly needed. The organization is hard to judge in such a brief paper, but there is at least a brief introduction in which the writer establishes some context for her position. The language seems to represent a beginning English language learner who has gained a minimal understanding of English sentence structure, but there are many errors (e.g., missing words, spelling mistakes, incorrect word forms, and confusion between singular and plural word forms).

## Strategies for Taking the CUNY/ACT Writing Sample Essay

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

- 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.
- The first choice you will be making is: which question do I want to write about? Questions are usually about school- or community-based issues. 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.
- 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. The planning work you do on these pages will not be evaluated.

**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.

- 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. If you use specific examples, be sure you explain how these examples represent the group you are discussing. 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.
- 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.
- 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 a 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 a school-based question, you might think about how your choice would benefit most students or different types of students (or even parents or teachers).

**Revising and editing:** Spend about 10 minutes reviewing your writing, adding or deleting as necessary and making any changes needed to enhance clarity.