

The International
CRITICAL
THINKING
READING AND
WRITING TEST

*How to Assess Close Reading and
Substantive Writing*

SECOND EDITION

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The International Critical Thinking Reading & Writing Test

Introduction

The International Critical Thinking Reading & Writing Test assesses the ability of students to use reading and writing as tools for acquiring knowledge. To appreciate the significance of this test, it is important to understand the integral relationship between reading, writing, and learning.

Reading, Writing and the Educated Mind

Educated persons routinely read closely and write substantively—to learn new ideas, to deepen their understanding of ideas, and to correct conceptual misunderstandings.

To read closely is to construct accurately the meaning of the texts one reads. It involves constructing the thinking of an author in one's own mind, in such a way that were the author to hear the summary, he or she would say, "Excellent, you understand exactly what I was saying!"

Educated persons realize that many of the most important ideas and insights are to be found only in written publications. They also realize that there is a significant difference between reading closely (and hence being able to say accurately and precisely what is said in a text) and reading superficially (and hence being able merely to express a vague, and often erroneous, facsimile of what is said in a text).

To write substantively is to say something worth saying about something worth saying something about. It involves the ability to identify important ideas and express significant implications of those ideas in clear and precise writing.

Educated persons understand the important difference between writing that is merely fluent (but says nothing worth saying) and writing that is substantial (that says something important). They realize, in other words, the difference between "style" and "substance."

To read and write with skill and insight:

1. Students need to understand *how* to read and write well. In other words, they need to understand the *theory* behind close reading and substantive writing. They need to make intuitive in their thinking the conceptual connections behind skilled reading and writing, and then to grasp how skilled reading and writing interrelate.
2. They need practice in close reading and substantive writing. If they are ever to become skilled at reading and writing, students need daily practice, over many years, in disciplined reading and writing. They must develop the habit of reading and writing for deep learning. Through this practice, they come to *learn how to learn*. They gain skills that enable them to continue learning throughout a lifetime.

The Relationship Between Reading and Writing

There is an intimate relationship between reading well and writing well. Any significant deficiency in reading entails a parallel deficiency in writing. Any significant deficiency in writing entails a parallel deficiency in reading.

For example, if students cannot distinguish writing that is clear from writing that is unclear, there will be problems in their reading. They will, for example, mistake vague ideas for clear ones. They will think they understand when they don't. For example, suppose students read the sentence, "Democracy is a form of government in which the people rule." Students skilled in close reading will recognize that they don't really know what this sentence means until they answer the following questions: "Who exactly are *the people*?" and "What exactly is meant by the word *rule*?" In other words, they will recognize the importance of explicating the meaning of the words *people* and *rule*. They will see that understanding these concepts is essential to giving meaning to the sentence.

Similarly, if students cannot detect significant vagueness and ambiguity within texts they read, they will have difficulty formulating significant concepts as they write. In fact, to write substantively students must be able to bring ideas from a text into their thinking, arranging those ideas logically in clear prose style.

In superficial uncritical reading, students soon forget and often distort what they read. In superficial uncritical writing, students often misrepresent what is in the text. Superficial writing does not help students take ownership of the substance they write about. It produces instead an illusion of knowledge. It opens the door for multiple forms of misunderstanding.

Thus, close reading and substantive writing are symbiotic skills of disciplined thought. Both require that we think from multiple perspectives. Both require that we use the elements of reasoning well.¹ In other words, both require the intellectual ability to:

1. **Clarify purposes:** an author's purpose(s) (when we read), and our own purpose(s) (when we write).
2. **Formulate clear questions:** those that an author is asking (as we read) and those we are pursuing (as we write).
3. **Distinguish accurate and relevant information from inaccurate and irrelevant information:** in texts that we read and in preparation for our own writing.
4. **Reach logical inferences or conclusions:** based on what we read, and in preparation for writing.
5. **Identify significant and deep concepts:** those of an author and those we want to guide our thinking while we write.
6. **Distinguish justifiable from unjustifiable assumptions:** that an author is using, or that we are using in our own thinking as we write.
7. **Trace logical implications:** those of an author's thinking, and those that may follow from our written work.

¹ For explication of the elements of reasoning, see: Linda Elder, and Richard Paul. 2003. *A Miniature Guide to the Foundations of Analytic Thinking*. Dillon Beach, California: Foundation for Critical Thinking. www.criticalthinking.org

- Test graders should reach consensus on the range of plausible interpretations for any particular test form.
- Once a consensus is achieved, all participating graders should assess several forms completed by students and then compare scoring results by each grader.
- The result should be within a one-point range. That is, the margin of error for graders should be plus or minus one point. Graders should work with at least two other faculty graders until the scoring of the exams falls consistently within this range.

Applying the Grading Rubrics to Our Specimen Answers

We consider each of specimen answers to be at the level of *excellent*, though some might benefit from further elaboration.

Consequential Validity

This test, when used appropriately and graded accurately, should lead to a high degree of *consequential validity*. In other words, the use of the test should cause teachers to teach in such a way as to foster close reading and substantive writing abilities. For example, for students to perform well on Form AA, they must be able to accurately paraphrase what they read. They will not be able to effectively do this if they have not been taught the skills necessary for doing so. They will need practice in it. Therefore, teachers will need to design instruction so that students learn how to accurately paraphrase, and get adequate practice in paraphrasing. Similarly, for students to perform well on Forms A and B, teachers will need to design instruction so that students get routine practice in stating, elaborating, exemplifying, and illustrating the thesis of a text. In addition, for students to perform well on Forms C and D, teachers will need to teach students how to analyze and assess reasoning and give them practice in doing so.

In other words, for students to perform well on the test, teachers will need to design instruction so that students *can* perform well on the test. Students cannot become skilled in paraphrasing without practice in it. Students cannot become skilled in summarizing a thesis without practice in it. They cannot become skilled in analyzing and assessing reasoning without practice in it. However, when they have routine practice in paraphrasing, summarizing, analyzing, and assessing, they will develop skills of mind requisite to learning well within any subject or discipline, and thinking well within any domain of human life.

In short, use of the test should lead students to learn some of the most important skills they need to function in the world as educated persons.

Using the Test in Pre- or Post-Instruction (or both)

Any part of the test can be used in pre- or post-instruction format in order to assess improvement in skills after instruction and/or to gather data for research purposes.

On Civil Disobedience Form A

Paraphrasing A Text Sentence by Sentence

Background Understandings. From an essay on civil disobedience (pp. 635, 636–637, 644), originally written in 1849 by Henry David Thoreau,⁵ a well-known scholar in 19th Century American cultural and literary thought.

I heartily accept the motto, “That government is best which governs least”; and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe, “That government is best which governs not at all”; and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have. Government is at best but an expedient; but most governments are usually, and all governments are sometimes, inexpedient. The objections which have been brought against a standing army, and they are many and weighty, and deserve to prevail, may also at last be brought against a standing government. The standing army is only an arm of the standing government. The government itself, which is only the mode which the people have chosen to execute their will, is equally liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it.

Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience?...Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience, to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right....If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go;...If the injustice has a spring, or a pulley, or a rope, or a crank, exclusively for itself, then perhaps you can consider whether the remedy will not be worse than the evil; but if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine.

Directions: Paraphrase the text above in sections, as indicated below.

I heartily accept the motto, “That government is best which governs least”; and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically.

PARAPHRASE:

Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe, “That government is best that governs not at all”;

PARAPHRASE:

⁵ Thoreau, Henry David. 1937. *Walden and Other Writings*. New York: The Modern Library.

On Civil Disobedience

Specimen Answers—Form D

Evaluating the Logic of a Text

1. **Do the authors say clearly what they mean, or is the text vague, confused, or muddled in some way?** The text is clear. We understand from the text precisely what the author means.
2. **Is the author accurate in what he claims?** The standard of accuracy applies most readily to the examples Thoreau provides to support his conclusions that governments often act in opposition to the needs and desires of the people. These examples are included in the larger text from which this text was excerpted. However, since any informed person could easily list a number of examples in support of Thoreau's claims, his main conclusions appear to be accurate.
3. **Is the author sufficiently precise in providing details and specifics (when relevant)?** Like the standard of accuracy, the standard of precision applies most readily to the list of examples supporting Thoreau's claims that governments often function unethically.
4. **Is the author true to his purpose or does he wander, thereby introducing irrelevant material?** All of the text seems highly relevant to the central purpose of persuading people to see that governments are obligated to serve the people and that people are obligated to hold the government accountable for unethical actions.
5. **Does the author take us into the important complexities inherent in the subject, or is the writing superficial?** In this very short text, the author does a good job of helping readers begin to see the problems inherent in most governing bodies and the laws created by governments. Yet, we would need to read further in the text to see how Thoreau recommends that people "break the law," that is, how realistic and feasible it would be for people to actually break the law to bring about change in the justice system. We would have to think through whether and to what extent breaking the law will actually lead to change, and whether it is reasonable to ask people to break the law, especially when the punishment would likely be harsh (especially in a country like the U.S. where punishments often far exceed what is reasonable given the "crime" they commit).
6. **Does the author consider other relevant points of view, or is the writing overly narrow in its perspective?** As a political directive, Thoreau's position is broad in scope. He is clearly concerned with creating a more just society, as he calls on his readers to do what they can to reduce the amount of injustice within their own culture. He is concerned about the rights and needs of all people within a society, which is clear evidence of a broad perspective.