

A Description of the



# CUNY Proficiency Examination

## Information for Students



**2003-2004**

Office of Assessment  
The City University of New York  
555 West 57th Street • New York, NY 10019



A Description of the CUNY Proficiency Examination  
**Information for Students**

2003-2004

---

**Contents**

Overview .....	1
University Policy and Frequently Asked Questions .....	1
Task 1	
Directions and Reading Selections .....	5
Sample Writing Assignment .....	12
Scoring Guide .....	13
Sample Student Essays .....	14
Task 2	
Sample Assignment .....	18
Scoring Guide .....	20
Student Responses .....	21
Campus Resources .....	24
Campus CPE Liaisons .....	26

---

# The CUNY Proficiency Examination

www.cuny.edu/cpe

2003-2004

## Overview

In 1997, the Board of Trustees of the City University of New York (CUNY) put in place a policy requiring students in both associate and baccalaureate programs to demonstrate their command of certain vital academic skills by the time they reach the 60<sup>th</sup> credit. These skills are associated primarily with academic literacy: the ability to understand and think critically about ideas and information presented in print and the ability to write clearly, logically, and correctly. Employers of CUNY graduates consistently stress the importance of strength in these areas. These skills are also vital to success in the junior and senior year in bachelor's programs, as well as in graduate and professional study. The CUNY Proficiency Exam (CPE) requires students to demonstrate their competence in aspects of academic literacy that the CUNY faculty considers important for later success. Specifically, the CPE tests some of the skills that you have developed through the course work that you have taken: reading and interpreting textbooks and material of general interest; organizing and presenting your ideas about what you have read and connecting those ideas to other information or concepts; writing clearly and effectively for an audience; and interpreting and evaluating material presented in charts and graphs.

## The Format of the CPE

The exam consists of two tasks for which a total of three hours is allotted:

### Task 1: Analytical Reading and Writing (2 hours)

You will be given two reading selections, an 8 to 9 page selection to be studied in advance and a 1 to 1 1/2 page selection at the test. You will be asked to write a focused essay, drawing a relationship between specified elements of the two reading selections and extending it, as directed, to your own experience, understanding, or ideas.

### Task 2: Analyzing and Integrating Material from Graphs and Text (1 hour)

At the exam you will be given a set of materials (two charts or graphs and a brief reading passage) on the same or similar topics. These materials are not released prior to the testing session. You will be asked to identify and state accurately the claims in the reading selection and to explain the relationship between these claims and the relevant data in the figures with accuracy, clarity, and completeness.

## Who is required to take the CPE?

As of September 1, 2003 all students pursuing an associate or bachelor's degree at CUNY must take and pass the CPE. Passage of the exam is a requirement for the associate degree, while students pursuing a bachelor's degree must pass by the time they have completed their 60<sup>th</sup> credit. Effective September 1, 2003, these requirements apply to all students pursuing these two degrees, no matter when they first entered CUNY. (Exemptions that previously had been in effect for freshmen who had matriculated at CUNY before Fall 1999 and for transfers who first arrived before Fall 2000 are no longer in force.)

### 1. Transfer Students from Outside CUNY

**No previous attendance at CUNY.** All new transfers must take and pass the CPE.

- Students transferring to a senior college who enter with 45 or more credits must take the CPE in their first semester at CUNY and must pass it by their 60<sup>th</sup> credit.
- Those who enter with 60 or more credits (unless exempted) must take the CPE at the first administration of the exam after they enter.
- Transfers entering with fewer than 45 credits must take the CUNY Basic Skills Tests (unless exempted) before entering and follow placement recommendations. They must pass the CPE by the time they have completed their 60<sup>th</sup> credit.

**Previous attendance at CUNY.** All students in this category now must take and pass the CPE, no matter when they first enrolled at CUNY. (Same credit conditions as above.)

## **2. Students transferring within CUNY**

- All students transferring within CUNY must fulfill the CUNY basic skills requirements before transferring.
- Students transferring within CUNY with more than 45 credits should have taken the CPE at least once before transferring.
- Senior colleges may (but are not required to) admit CUNY students to a baccalaureate program if they have completed all requirements for the associate degree except passing the CPE. Like other transfer students, these transfer students must take the exam during the first semester of baccalaureate study and thereafter as required. These transfer students are not eligible for the benefits accorded by the articulation policy of 2000 to associate degree recipients at the senior colleges until they pass the CPE and are awarded the associate degree. Under the articulation policy, students who have completed an associate degree (AA or AS) are able to transfer all of their credits to the senior college.

### **Exemptions**

Students who have earned a bachelor's degree or a higher degree from an accredited program are exempted from CPE requirements.

### **What are the rules and procedures that apply to taking the CPE?**

- You must take the CPE for the first time after you have completed 45 credits. If you are a new transfer student with 45 or more credits, you will take the CPE in your first semester at CUNY.
- You may take the CPE for the first time during the semester in which you register for your 45<sup>th</sup> credit.
- You must be in good academic standing—students whose GPA is below 2.0 may not take the CPE.
- You must have met the CUNY basic skills requirements in reading and writing in order to qualify to take the CPE.
- You may take the CPE three times and may appeal for a fourth attempt if necessary.

### **How do I register for the CPE?**

You will register for the CPE at your college testing office early in the semester, 2-3 weeks before the test date:

- Colleges will send letters to students who have completed 45 or more credits reminding them to register.
- If you have completed 45 or more credits, you *must* register for and take the CPE even if you do not receive a letter from your college. *You will forfeit one of your chances to take the CPE if you skip a required administration.*

### **Can the CPE Be Substituted for CUNY-ACT Basic Skills Tests?**

Students may no longer meet the CUNY-ACT basic skills tests requirements in reading and writing by passing the CPE.

### **How should I get ready for the CPE?**

The CPE tests skills that you have developed through the course work you have already completed. English composition and writing-intensive courses are good preparation for Task 1, while the skills assessed in Task 2 are addressed primarily in social science, science and mathematics courses. If you have difficulty with writing, arrange to work in the writing or learning center at your college. You can find the location of your college's learning center in the Campus Resources section of this booklet.

**Here are some suggestions for preparation well before the day of the test:**

- Become familiar with the CPE format, directions, and grading criteria.
- Every college offers support services for students preparing to take the CPE. Attend an information session or take a workshop.
- Sample test questions, annotated student responses, and scoring guidelines are presented later in this booklet. Review this material carefully.
- When you receive the reading selection for Task 1, you will have about two weeks to study it before the test. Read the selection several times and underline, mark up, highlight, or outline the important points in the text as you would if you were studying for a course examination. Use a dictionary to look up words you do not know.

**At the time of the test:**

- Plan your answers.
- Follow the directions carefully, answering all parts of the question for each task.
- Summarize **only** the parts of the readings called for, not the entire reading.
- Avoid plagiarism by making a clear distinction between your own words and the language of the readings. Identify language or ideas that you take from the readings.
- Explain and support your points fully.
- Keep the reader in mind—focusing your essay, making logical connections between readings (Task 1) or between the reading passage and data (Task 2).
- Reserve time to edit and correct your work.

***What should I bring with me to the CPE session?***

You **must** bring your copy of the reading selection, but no other papers. In addition, you **must** bring a pen, a #2 pencil, and picture identification. You may bring one dictionary for use during the test; however, no electronic spellers or other devices may be used.

***What are the arrangements for students with disabilities?***

Accommodations based on disabilities will be granted to comply with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act. Please contact your college testing office if you require such accommodations.

In rare instances a student with a disability may not reasonably be accommodated within the framework of the test as currently administered. Such students may demonstrate proficiency through an alternative means, to be determined by the academic administration of the college in consultation with the disability coordinator. Students who wish to receive such an accommodation should request it in writing from the appeals committee at least one month in advance of the test administration that the student wishes to attend.

***How is the CPE scored?***

Task 1 and Task 2 are scored separately by different groups of readers, with the responses to each task being read by two trained readers. If the two readers disagree by more than a minimal amount, the essay is read by a third reader.

**Task 1: Analytical Reading and Writing.** Four criteria are used to rate each essay:

- Developing an essay that is a focused response to the writing assignment, making appropriate connections among all parts of the assignment;
- Demonstrating understanding of the readings through summary and explanation of relevant material;
- Incorporating, as support for your own thoughts, appropriate references to the readings, identifying the sources formally or informally;
- Communicating clearly and effectively, using appropriate conventions of language (e.g., word choice, grammar, punctuation, spelling).

**Task 2: Analyzing and Integrating Material from Graphs and Text.** The criteria used to rate your response are:

- identifying and stating the claims in the reading selection accurately; and
- explaining the relationship between these claims and relevant data in the figures with accuracy, clarity, and completeness.

***How will I learn my results?***

You will receive a letter informing you of your results at the end of the semester in which you take the test.

***What happens if I don't pass the CPE the first time I take it?***

You may take the CPE three times.

- If you fail the CPE, see a CPE advisor to plan an exam preparation program. You should plan to retest during the next semester. The advisor may recommend one or more of the following activities: tutoring, workshops for students repeating the CPE, writing courses, or writing-intensive courses in a specific discipline.
- If you need a third try, you **must** see a CPE advisor and complete the recommended instruction before retesting.
- Remember: if you do not take the CPE when you are required to do so, you forfeit one chance to take the test.

***Who is the CPE Liaison?***

Each college has appointed a faculty member to serve as CPE Liaison. The CPE Liaison can assist students who wish to seek a deferral or appeal. At some colleges, the CPE Liaison is available to review your test results with you if you did not pass the test and recommend an appropriate test preparation program. You can find the name of your college's CPE Liaison in the Campus Resources section of this booklet.

***What is a deferral?***

A student who has failed the CPE for the first time may request permission from the appeals committee to defer taking the next required test. After consulting with the CPE Liaison or Adviser, students seeking a deferral must state in writing to the appeals committee the reason for the request and agree to take the CPE at the next administration. If the committee grants the appeal, the student will be notified of the conditions governing the deferral. For specific information on deferrals, please contact your college's testing office.

***How will student appeals be handled?***

All appeals must be made in writing to the committee at the college designated for that purpose. You may appeal to get permission to take the CPE early (before you've registered for the 45<sup>th</sup> credit), or to take the test even though you lack one or more of the pre-requisites. In addition, you may request a deferral, appeal a forfeit, or petition for additional opportunities to test. For specific information on appeals procedures, please contact your college's testing office.

# SAMPLE QUESTIONS

## Task 1: Analytical Reading and Writing

### Sample Writing Assignment and Student Essays

This task is based on reading selection A, "The Community as Commodity" by Robert Reich, which you were given to read and study in advance and on Reading Selection B, "Engagement and Detachment: Getting Involved" by Philip Slater. The readings are printed below. Read "Engagement and Detachment" and review "The Community as Commodity" in light of the writing assignment, which is printed following Reading Selection B below.

---

#### Reading Selection A

##### The Community as Commodity\*

Robert B. Reich

(From *The Future of Success* by Robert Reich, copyright © 2000 by Robert B. Reich. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc.)

UNCLE BILLY [*emotionally, at breaking point*]: Mary did it, George! Mary did it! She told a few people you were in trouble and they scattered all over town collecting money. They didn't ask any questions—just said: "If George is in trouble—count on me." You never saw anything like it.

—*It's a Wonderful Life*, screenplay, 1946

THE FINAL CONSEQUENCE of the emerging economy for our personal lives concerns the communities we inhabit. Communities used to pick up where families left off. Home schooling gave way to the local public school; the very sick moved from home to the local hospital; libraries and playgrounds provided access to expensive facilities few families could afford on their own. Think of a "community," and you're likely to picture a place where people look after one another—a traditional neighborhood, church, voluntary association, New England town meeting, frontier barn-raising, quilting bee, volunteer fire department, charity supper. The last scene in Frank Capra's 1946 movie *It's a Wonderful Life* typifies the American ideal: just as George (Jimmy Stewart) is about to give up in despair, he finds he can count on his neighbors' generosity and goodness, as they have always counted on his. They're bound together in common cause and friendship.

Contrast this imagery to a more recently heard lament: Americans lack community. We're no longer joiners. We don't know the people next door. We "bowl alone."<sup>1</sup> Since most of us are working harder and selling ourselves with ever-greater gusto, no one should be surprised if we have less energy to spend with our neighbors.

But the view that we're no longer joining with others is not quite correct, and it fails to account for the most important aspect of what's happening. We're still joining together—for child care, elder care, schools, health care, insurance, health clubs, investment clubs, buying clubs, recreational facilities, private security guards, and everything else that's too expensive to purchase alone. But we're not joining as participants; we're joining as consumers. We're pooling our financial resources to get the best deal.

The same advances in communication, transportation, and information technologies that are giving us wider choices of products and investments are giving us wider choices of whom to join and for what purpose. And as with other facets of our new lives, we can abandon the community we choose almost instantly and switch to another in pursuit of an even better deal. Like personal attention, communities are becoming marketable goods. We get what we pay for, and we pay not a penny more than necessary for what we get.

#### New Groups

Through most of human history, community members didn't have much choice about whom they joined. They were born into their communities and usually died in the same ones. Some notably broke with theirs or were banished, but these partings were rare or traumatic. Even well into the industrial age, most people still congregated within extended families and clans that gave definition to city neighborhoods. Members of these communities stayed put for at least a generation or two.

These communities provided their members some security and care. Yet they often did so at the price of boredom and stifled opportunity. One of history's crowning achievements has been to give people a *choice* of community. An unprecedented share of Americans (and citizens of other modern nations) now enjoy the freedom to escape the communities they were born into. They can choose whom they join with, and then switch to another

group if they wish—another residential community, spa, health plan, child-care center. They can abandon their cyber-communities with a click. As choice replaces random fate, surely community life will be richer, more harmonious, and happier. How could it be otherwise?

For one thing, membership in the older communities extended to many facets of a member's life. There were many different arrangements, of course, but mutual obligations and benefits tended to come in a big bundle: production, defense, care, nourishment, parenting, entertainment, and spirituality. As a participant, you contributed no less to the bundle than was expected of you, and extracted no more than you were expected to take. Clan members produced for the clan and took care of one another's children, sick, or elderly.

By contrast, the new communities offer highly specific benefits. You pick a community for exactly what you want from it. As with other aspects of your new life, you shop for the best community you can afford. Because exit is so easy and the benefits are so targeted, these new communities don't require nearly as much commitment as the old did, nor do they offer the same security to members who might need to depend on one another in a pinch. Sure, you develop friends in a childcare group, but you don't have to reveal as much about yourself along the way, and you can end the friendship instantly, as can they.

Here's the real catch. Given the range of choice and ease of switching, we're sorting ourselves into communities of people with roughly the same incomes, the same abilities, the same risks, and the same needs. Where we live has more to do with how much we earn than ever before. It's Vail and Greenwich versus the communities who attend to them—but on a much larger scale. People who are most buffeted by the new economy—whose incomes have eroded the most, whose earnings are the most precarious—are ending up together in the same poor communities.<sup>2</sup> Their schools are among the worst. They have less medical attention. Their insurance is more costly. Even when they pool what they can afford, the parents of toddlers still can't raise enough for good-quality day care. This sorting process started years ago, but it's become far more efficient, just when the people who are being sorted away into neglected communities need help the most.

### **The Sorting Mechanism**

To understand what is taking place, you have to understand the sorting mechanism. All other things being equal, someone who buys into a community wants the highest return on his or her investment—the best value, best service, most enjoyable and stimulating peers, largest amount of prestige their money will buy. Those already *in* likewise want the highest return on every new member—people who will contribute as much as if not more than they, and who make minimum demands on the common pool of resources. Unless your motive is charitable, there's no sense joining a community composed of a lot of people who are more costly and needy than you, because you'll end up subsidizing them. And it's irrational for a group to go out of its way to attract members who will be a drain on it, or to provide benefits that will likely attract such people.

When a friend recently landed a job at the University of California at Los Angeles and his wife got a job in a financial firm in downtown Los Angeles, the two of them toured many different communities within a fifty-minute commute for both in order to find a good place to live. After they narrowed their pick of community, they examined a variety of condominiums and cooperatives. They finally settled on the best deal they could afford—within a condominium complex possessing its own security guards, maintenance crew, modest recreation facility, and even broadband Internet connection, in a neighborhood that was safe and attractive and contained a good elementary school for their daughter. In making their decision, they naturally considered the price of the condominium and the monthly fee that went along with it, as well as local taxes. They didn't consciously seek to live in a community containing few poor people whose children would need extra instruction in school and whose overall family needs would require more social services and hence higher local taxes to pay for them. And they didn't intentionally choose a condominium complex whose price would screen out poorer people with larger families that might use up more of the common amenities. They simply tried to find the best deal for their money. They had a lot of information and a wide array of choices (townships with different tax bases, private residential communities with different monthly fees).

The wider the choice and the greater the ease of switching to something better, the more efficient the sorting mechanism becomes. Individuals try to get into groups offering them the best deals—not only the best cities or townships and the best private residential communities they can afford, but also the best universities, primary and secondary schools, child-care centers, nursing homes and elder-care centers, insurance pools, professional partnerships, and companies. And such groups compete to attract the most desirable members—those who can contribute the most and demand the least. As a result, the most desirable end up clustering together, sometimes nationwide, even worldwide. And with ever-greater efficiency, they exclude those who are less valuable or more needy. The next most desirable cluster together as well, and exclude those who are more costly than they. And so on, down the line.

I've made it sound like a cold calculation—colder and more calculating than it usually is—in order to reveal a logic that's just under the surface of society, and likely to become ever more apparent as choices widen and information improves, and it becomes easier to switch to better deals. Few people employ the sorting mechanism consciously. It is, rather, the consequence of a large number of rational personal decisions.

## Residential Sorting

Begin with the decision my friend and his wife made about where to live. In a world of wider choices and easier switches, more people like them are making such decisions according to how much they can get for their money, and implicitly choosing not to subsidize people who are likely to contribute less to, or use up a lot more of, common resources. As residential communities have become commodities—marketed, evaluated, and purchased like any other—it's easier for buyers to get just what they want. And sellers have stronger incentives to offer just such deals.

Local services in *private* residential communities—the fastest-growing part of the US. housing market—are supported by membership dues. Such services in exclusive *public* townships, like Vail or Greenwich, are financed by local property taxes. But private or public, the sorting mechanism is essentially the same. Private residential communities exclude large families that need a lot of schools and social services, and whose children may be noisy or engage in petty crime, by charging hefty prices for homes and high membership fees and by strictly limiting the number of bedrooms in each unit. Upscale townships do it by requiring two- to four-acre plots for each home and prohibiting multifamily housing. Despite Vail's labor shortage, its residents don't want low-income housing that might threaten their property values. The only affordable housing that hasn't drawn complaints is situated in an old gravel quarry on a flood plain, forty-five miles away.<sup>3</sup>

"Citizens' movements" against state and local taxes have been spearheaded by private homeowner associations whose members see no reason why they should pay to support families outside the gates when members are getting everything they need inside, through their dues. In 1990, the New Jersey legislature defused one such revolt by agreeing to reimburse residents of private communities the taxes paid for public trash collection, snow removal, street lighting, and other public amenities because those residents were already paying for them privately. In other words, homeowners would pay only for what they got and no longer subsidize other communities needing more.

Depending on which is the more efficient means of sorting, private residential communities can morph into public townships, and vice versa. On March 24, 1999, the Leisure World retirement village in Orange County transformed itself from a gated community into one of California's newest municipalities: Laguna Woods, whose average citizen is seventy-seven years old. The change allows residents to keep more of their tax dollars for themselves, paying only for the swimming pools, tennis courts, riding stables, and lawn care within the new city's boundaries rather than spending money on schools and social services for children in the rest of the county.

I once described this as the "secession of the successful," but in recent years the sorting mechanism has extended further down the economic ladder. As the proportion of married-with-children households continues to shrink and that of elders rises, more school districts contain larger concentrations of older people who vote for lower taxes and lousy schools rather than the opposite combination. Meanwhile, American cities are creating all manner of "special service" districts for middle-class residents and business owners willing to pay assessments for more trash collection, cleaning, and police—so long as the extra services are performed solely inside the district. Exclusive communities are even becoming exclusively wired. In the not-too-distant future, they'll link all their households, schools, retail stores, and offices to single giant high-speed networks—allowing teachers to communicate more easily with parents, businesses with their employees, and everyone with their town officials.<sup>4</sup> Gated communities used to be just for the very rich, but now middle-income home buyers want in. In 1970, the nation had more public police officers than private security guards; now it hires three times as many private guards as public ones—in California, four times as many.<sup>5</sup>

The secession of middle- and lower-middle-income families is also leading America back toward racially segregated neighborhoods. The probability that a black student will have white classmates dropped during the 1990s. You can spot the trend in most of the nation's large metropolitan areas. At the start of the nineties, about 10 percent of Chicago's neighborhoods could still be described as integrated (with black families constituting 10 to 50 percent); by the middle of the decade, less than 3 percent.<sup>6</sup>

## School Sorting

As the stakes in getting a good education continue to rise, parents more aggressively seek the best education they can afford for their children. And the best deals are where *other* students are at least as intelligent, ambitious, and intellectually stimulating—and less likely to use up the scarce attention of teachers by being troublesome or needing a lot of extra help.

Peer effects among school-age children are significant—a fact that parents of teenagers will hardly find surprising. High-school students are more likely to go to college when more of their classmates are college-bound.<sup>7</sup> And whatever their level of ability, students do better in groups more able than they, on average, and worse in groups less able, although the process isn't symmetrical. Students of less ability are helped more by being together in classrooms with students of greater ability than the more able are hurt by being combined with the less.<sup>8</sup> New evidence strongly suggests that such childhood peer effects extend beyond schools to the communities surrounding them. After a random sample of poor inner-city families received housing vouchers that enabled them to move to higher-income suburbs, their children's behavior improved relative to children in families who wanted the vouchers but lost out in the lottery.<sup>9</sup>