

# The CUNY CPE Task I Handout

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## Overview

The materials in this handout are meant to be a supplement to tutoring and workshop sessions not a substitute for them.

Task I is a reading comprehension and essay-writing exam, which requires students to read two passages and write an essay responding to them. The first passage will be approximately 8-12 single-spaced pages and will be provided for you in advance. This reading can usually be obtained through your college's testing office or through the CUNY website. Henceforth, this reading will be referred to as Reading A. The second reading will be only one or two single-spaced pages, and it will be provided on the day of the exam. This reading will relate to Reading A in some way, but it may not share the same overall topic. Henceforth, this reading will be referred to as Reading B.

Also, visit the following website for a model CPE exam and more test preparation materials:

<http://www1.cuny.edu/academics/oaa/testing/proficiency.html>

## The Prompt

Unlike most essays written for college, the CPE has a very specific prompt that asks writers to address specific questions and topics. On the day of the exam, students will receive a small booklet containing the short reading, the prompt, space for notes and planning, and lined paper for the final response. Following the prompt closely and completely is necessary for obtaining a high score, and not doing so is a sure way to failure. The following is an example prompt used on a previous CPE exam:

With these reading selections by Jerome M. Segal and Arlie Russel Hochschild in mind, write an essay in which you discuss the role of work in a person's life. In your essay, summarize Segal's key points about the importance of work and money. Draw a relationship between Segal's thinking and what you have just read about American attitudes towards the workplace. In light of the reading selections, discuss your own knowledge or observations about the role of work in a person's life. Also discuss the degree to which your perspective reflects the ideas of either or both writers.

As you can see, the prompt contains many specific topics. Only by fully addressing all of these parts can students expect to maximize their score. Fortunately, the overall format of this prompt generally remains unchanged from test to test. Therefore, the following model prompt with the specifics removed will illustrate the kind of prompt that will be found on the day of the

exam:

With these reading selections by Author A and Author B in mind, write an essay in which you discuss The Overall Topic. In your essay, summarize Author A's key points about Topic 1. Draw a relationship between Author A's thinking and what you have just read about Topic 2. In light of the reading selections, discuss your own knowledge or observations about Topic 3. Also discuss the degree to which your perspective reflects the ideas of either or both writers.

In the following sections, this guide will break the prompt down into its individual sections and explain the specific expectations that the readers have for each part of the prompt.

**Part I—Introduction:** “With these reading selections by Author A and Author B in mind, write an essay in which you discuss The Overall Topic.”

**Remember:**

- Give the authors' names and the titles of the two readings.
- Give a brief, one sentence, summary of each reading.
- Mention the overall topic.

**Part II—Summarize:** “In your essay, summarize Author A's key points about Topic 1.”

**Remember:**

- Stay on topic
- Only use Reading A
- Summarize Author A's main points and provide specific details and examples from the readings to support your points.

**Part III—Draw a Relationship:** “Draw a relationship between Author A's thinking and what you have just read about Topic 2.”

**Remember:**

- Relate Reading A to Reading B.
- Find a specific point or general theme on which the two readings overlap and state the relationship clearly and directly.
- Support the relationship with specific details and examples from the readings.

**Part IV—Analyze:** “In light of the reading selection, discuss your own knowledge or observations about Topic 3. Also, discuss the degree to which your perspective reflects the ideas of either or both writers.”

**Remember:**

- Stay on topic
- State your opinions on the topic
- Provide personal knowledge or experience to support your opinions, focusing on life experiences, which may be real or invented.

- Relate these experiences to one or both of the readings.

## Paragraph Structure

Understanding the various parts of the question is only the first step in the response process. You must also be able to arrange your response in a clear and coherent order. Although no single order exists for the response, some general tips and guidelines can be followed to significantly simplify and improve the overall response.

- Follow the overall structure of the prompt in your response
- Do not mix parts of the prompt in the same paragraph and give each part of the prompt at least one full paragraph
- Do not spend time on material not directly related to the prompt
- Include clear topic sentences at the beginning of each paragraph, referring to topic found in the prompt

## Writing Tips

In addition to having a good, strong structure, each response must also have clear and effective writing that conveys the overall message of the essay without significant errors. The only way to ensure that your writing is relatively free of technical errors is to bring a writing sample to your college's writing center and write sample CPE responses for a tutor. However, certain basic writing tips can help you to avoid the test's major pitfalls and improve the overall written response.

- Use simple error-free quotations, following this format: [Author's Last Name] says, "--."
- Use clear, direct language with which you are comfortable
- Refer to the readings' authors when you are referring to their ideas
- Skip lines and write as legibly as possible
- Avoid Repetition

## Reading Preparation Strategies

Perhaps one of the most important elements of the preparation process for the exam is an effective reading strategy. Much of the Task I prompt requires that students have a clear understanding of Reading A. On the day of the exam, students who need to spend time reviewing the reading or searching for relevant material will have less time to write and edit. Importantly, all students are permitted to bring their copies of the long reading to the exam. These individual copies may be edited or marked in any way; moreover, the last few pages of each booklet contain blank pages that may be used for extensive note taking. Therefore, students should thoroughly prepare their Reading A by reading it a minimum of four times and taking careful notes each time.

1. **Overview:** The first time students read the long reading, they want to get an overview of the reading's main points and define any unknown words or terms.
2. **Main Points:** The questions in the prompt refer primarily to the author's main points. Although students can and should refer to details and examples found in the readings, responses must contain references to the Authors' main points. Therefore, on the second read through Reading A, students should underline any sentences that are main points in the reading. Remember, main points are statements that indicate one of the Author's assertions.
3. **Keywords:** On the third reading, students will want to identify their key points in each paragraph and make notes in the margin of each paragraph. These notes will allow students to find specific sections of the reading quickly on the day of the exam. Since the prompt requires students to address only specific parts of the reading, carefully preparing the response allows students to find parts of the problems quickly.
4. **Reminder:** The day before the exam, students should reread all the material related to Reading A, including all notes and underlining to ensure recall and accuracy. This final reading may seem frivolous, but it is absolutely critical.

## Review of Task I

Following the format carefully and preparing your reading in advance are among the most important factors leading to a well written response. Be sure, also, to follow each and every part of the directions carefully and completely. Remember that precisely following directions and staying on topic are more important than providing a certain amount of information. Frequently, supplying irrelevant information will have a strong, negative effect on a student's score. Finally, be sure to visit your college's writing center because only extensive practice sessions with a tutor will ensure preparedness on the day of the exam.