



The International

Critical Thinking Reading & Writing Test

How to Assess Close Reading
and Substantive Writing

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*Use in conjunction with:
The Thinker's Guide to Analytic Thinking
The Thinker's Guide to Critical Thinking Competency Standards*

The Foundation for Critical Thinking

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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.
- 8. 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.
- 4. Distinguish justifiable from unjustifiable assumptions:** that an author is using, or that we are using in our own thinking as we write.
- 6. 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

7. Identify and think within multiple viewpoints: those that an author presents (or fails to present when relevant) and those relevant to the issues in our written work (and that we need to include).

These are just a few examples that shed light on the intimate relationship between close reading and substantive writing and on the important connection between disciplined thought and skilled reading and writing. As students develop their abilities to read closely and write substantively, they come to see the many ways in which the two processes are related.

Purpose of the Test

The purpose of the test is to assess students' abilities to think in particular "disciplined" and skilled ways. If used successfully, the results make it possible to determine the extent to which students have and have not learned foundational critical thinking, reading and writing skills.

Intellectual Skills Essential to Close Reading²

To think within any discipline or subject, students must be able to deeply comprehend what they read. Consider the following competency standards for close reading.

Critical Thinking Principle

Educated persons are able to read texts closely and, through that process, take ownership of the most important ideas in them. They also understand the importance of reading to learning.

Performance Indicators and Dispositions

Students who think critically routinely read texts that are significant and thus expand their worldview. When reading, they consistently strive to accurately represent in their own thinking what they are reading in the text. Recognizing that every text has a purpose, they clarify the purpose of texts as they read them. Recognizing that close reading requires active engagement in reading, they create an inner dialog with the text as they read—questioning, summarizing and connecting important ideas with other important ideas.

Outcomes

1. Students reflect as they read.
2. Students monitor how they are reading as they are reading—distinguishing between what they understand in the text and what they do not understand.
3. Students accurately summarize and elaborate texts (in their own words) as they read.
4. Students give examples, from their experience, of ideas in texts.
5. Students connect the core ideas in a text to other core ideas they understand.
6. Students take the core ideas they obtain through reading and apply them to their lives.
7. Students accurately paraphrase what they read (sentence by sentence).

² For a deeper understanding of the skills described in this competency, see: Richard Paul, and Linda Elder. 2003. *The Thinker's Guide to How to Read a Paragraph and Beyond: The Art of Close Reading*. Dillon Beach, California: Foundation for Critical Thinking. www.criticalthinking.org

8. Students accurately and logically explicate the thesis of a paragraph:
 - First, students state the main point of the paragraph in one or two sentences.
 - Second, students elaborate what they have paraphrased. (“In other words. . .”)
 - Third, students give examples of the meaning by tying it to concrete situations in the real world. (“For example. . .”)
 - Fourth, students generate apt illustrations: metaphors, analogies, pictures, or diagrams of the basic thesis (to connect the thesis to other meanings they already understand).
9. Students analyze the logic of what they read (its purpose, its main question, the information it contains, its main idea. . .)
10. Students evaluate what they read (for clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, and significance, and so forth).
11. Students accurately role-play an author’s viewpoint, as presented in a text.

Intellectual Skills Essential To Substantive Writing³

Now consider the intellectual skills necessary to substantive writing.

Critical Thinking Principle

Educated persons are able to write in such a way as to say something substantive. They also understand the importance of writing to learning.

Performance Indicators and Dispositions

Students who think critically use writing as an important tool both for communicating important ideas and for learning. They use writing to deepen their understanding of important concepts and to clarify interrelationships between concepts. They consistently write in such a way as to become more clear, precise, accurate, relevant, deep, broad, logical and significant as thinkers. In writing, they are able to clearly and accurately analyze and evaluate ideas in texts and in their own thinking. They consistently learn to write as they write to learn. In other words, they use writing as an important tool for learning ideas deeply and permanently.

Outcomes

1. Students reflect as they write.
2. Students monitor how they are writing as they are writing—distinguishing between what they understand in the text and what they do not understand.
3. Students accurately summarize (in their own words) texts they read, or ideas they hear.
4. Students routinely give examples from their experience as they write to (exemplify important ideas).
5. Students explicitly connect core ideas to other core ideas as they write.

³ For a deeper understanding of the skills described in this competency, see: Richard Paul, and Linda Elder. 2003. *The Thinker’s Guide to How to Write a Paragraph: The Art of Substantive Writing*. Dillon Beach, California: Foundation for Critical Thinking. www.criticalthinking.org

6. Students write about ideas that apply to their lives.
7. Students demonstrate the ability to explicate in writing the thesis they are developing or defending.
 - They state their main point.
 - They elaborate their main point.
 - They give examples of what they mean.
 - They create analogies and metaphors that help readers understand what they mean.
8. Students demonstrate the ability to clearly and accurately analyze, in writing, the logic of a text, chapter, academic subject, significant concept, and so on: (its purpose, its main question, the information it contains, its main idea...)
9. Students consistently use universal intellectual standards in their writing, routinely checking their writing for clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, significance, and fairness and so forth.

Five Levels of Close Reading and Substantive Writing

There are at least five levels of close reading and substantive writing. Our purpose in this test is to determine the test-taker's ability to read and write at one or more of these five levels of proficiency.

First Level—Paraphrasing

The first level of reading proficiency is that of accurately translating an author's wording into our own. In other words, we put the words and thoughts of the author into our words. Our paraphrase is successful only to the extent that our words capture the essential meaning of the original text, only to the extent that it makes intelligible the meaning of the original text.

Hence, if we read the following in a text: "democracy is rule by the people," our paraphrase of it might read, "Democracy exists only to the extent that there is a broad basis of equality of political power among the people at large. This means that all people within the state should have relatively equal power and equal input in determining what the laws will be. By implication, a state fails to be democratic to the extent that a few people—whether they be wealthy or otherwise influential—have significantly more political power than others." The paraphrase helps open up the text because it points us to possible problems in assessing the degree to which any country is democratic—for example, "Does it restrict the influence of the wealthy so they cannot use it to exercise a disproportionate influence in the decision-making of the government?"

Second Level—Explicating

In this proficiency we assess the thinker's (reader's) ability to state, elaborate, exemplify, and illustrate the thesis of a paragraph. Consider the four questions that can be used to assess writing for clarity:

1. Could you state your basic point in one simple sentence?

2. Could you elaborate your basic point more fully (in other words)?
 3. Could you give an example of your point?
 4. Could you give an analogy or metaphor to help clarify what you mean?
- Each of these clarification strategies requires substantive writing skills.

Clarification Strategies

- **The ability to state a thesis clearly in a sentence.** If we cannot accurately state our key idea in a sentence using our own words, we don't really know what we want to say.
- **The ability to explain a thesis sentence in greater detail.** If we cannot elaborate our key idea, then we have not yet connected its meaning to other concepts we understand.
- **The ability to give examples of what we are saying.** If we cannot connect what we have elaborated with concrete situations in the real world, our understanding of the meanings is still abstract, and, to some extent, vague.
- **The ability to illustrate what we are saying with a metaphor, analogy, picture, diagram, or drawing.** If we cannot generate metaphors, analogies, pictures, or diagrams of the meanings we are constructing, we have not yet connected what we understand with other domains of knowledge and experience.

Third Level—Analysis

At this level of proficiency we assess the student's ability to identify the following:

- The author's *purpose* in writing the text.
- The most important *question*, problem, or issue in the text.
- The most significant *information* or data in the text.
- The most basic *conclusion* in the text.
- The most basic *concepts*, theories, or ideas in the text.
- The most fundamental *assumptions* of the text.
- The most significant *implications* of the text.
- The *point of view* in the text.

Fourth Level—Evaluation

In this level of proficiency we assess the student's ability to evaluate or assess the text using eight basic intellectual standards.

Fifth Level—Role-Playing

In this level of proficiency, we assess the student's ability to actively role-play the thinking of the author.

These levels are summarized in the following chart, and written as directions for students.

First Level: Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing the Text Sentence by Sentence

1. State in your own words the meaning of each sentence as you read.

Second Level: Explicating

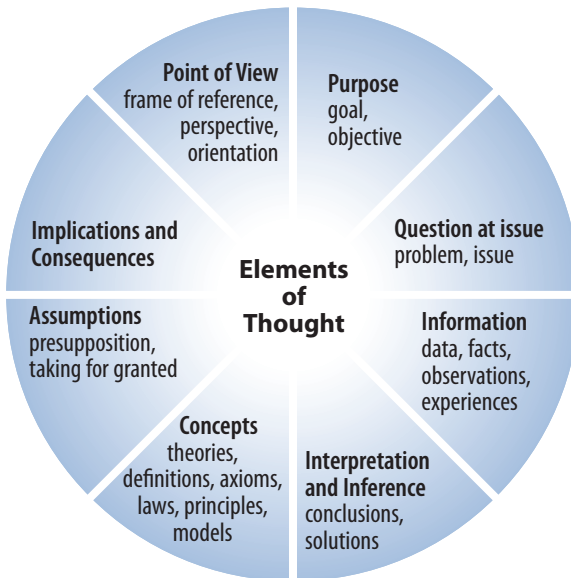
Explicating the Thesis of a Paragraph

1. State the main point of the paragraph in one or two sentences.
2. Then elaborate on what you have paraphrased (“In other words, . . .”).
3. Give examples of the meaning by tying it to concrete situations in the real world. (For example, . . .)
4. Generate metaphors, analogies, pictures, or diagrams of the basic thesis to connect it to other meanings you already understand.

Third Level: Analysis

Analyzing the Logic of Text

Anytime you read, you are reading the product of an author’s reasoning. You can use your understanding of the elements of reasoning, therefore, to bring your reading to a higher level. You can do this by writing your answers to the following questions (you may ask these questions in any order you want):



Use the template in Appendix A, *Analyzing the Logic of an Excerpt, Article, Essay, or Chapter*, to work through the logic of an author’s reasoning.

The Declaration of Independence

Form A

Paraphrasing A Text Sentence by Sentence

Background Understandings: From the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776.

To make sense of this paragraph one must understand that it is part of a political manifesto adopted by the Continental Congress proclaiming the independence of the thirteen British colonies in America from Great Britain.

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.

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

When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another,

PARAPHRASE:

and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them,

PARAPHRASE:

a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

PARAPHRASE:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

PARAPHRASE:

That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,

PARAPHRASE:

That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it,

PARAPHRASE:

and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

PARAPHRASE:

Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes;

PARAPHRASE:

and accordingly all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.

PARAPHRASE:

But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.

PARAPHRASE:

The Declaration of Independence

Form B

Explicating the Thesis of a Text

Directions: After reading the excerpt from the Declaration of Independence, complete the following four tasks:

1. State the thesis of the passage in your own words.
2. Elaborate the thesis with additional explanation. (“In other words...”)
3. Give one or more examples of the thesis.
4. Illustrate the thesis with a metaphor or analogy.

The Declaration of Independence Form C

Explicating the Logic of a Text (An analysis of eight basic structures)

Directions: After reading the Declaration of Independence, express clearly and precisely:

1. The author's *purpose*.
2. The most important *question*, problem, or issue in the excerpt.
3. The most significant *information* or data in the excerpt.
4. The most basic *conclusion* in the excerpt.
5. The most basic *concepts*, theories, or ideas in the excerpt.
6. The most fundamental *assumptions* of the excerpt.
7. The most significant *implications* of the excerpt.
8. The *point of view* in the excerpt.

See Appendix A: The Logic of an Excerpt, Article, Essay, or Chapter for a full template.

The Declaration of Independence

Form D

Evaluating the Logic of a Text

Directions: Assess the text according to eight basic intellectual standards.

1. Does the author express what he/she means clearly (or is the text vague, confused, or muddled in some way)?
2. Is the author accurate in what he/she claims?
3. Is the author sufficiently precise (providing details and specifics when they are relevant)?
4. Does the author wander from his/her purpose (thereby introducing irrelevant material)?
5. Does the author take us into the important complexities inherent in the subject (or is the writing superficial)?
6. Does the author consider other relevant points of view (or is the writing overly narrow in its perspective)?
7. Is the text internally consistent (or are there contradictions in the text)?
8. Is what the text says significant (or is the subject dealt with in a trivial manner)?
Does the author display fairness (or is the subject dealt with in an unfair manner)?