

Tips for passing the Upper Division Writing Proficiency Exam

wayne.smith@csun.edu
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“Writing is thinking on paper.”
---William Zinsser (1922-2015)

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to help student professionals pass the Upper Division Writing Proficiency Exam (UDWPE). This exam is required of each student at CSU Northridge by the time she or he has completed 75 units. Further details for the UDWPE are located at:

<http://www.csun.edu/undergraduate-studies/UDWPE>

Tips

I am the only COBAE faculty member that volunteers to help score this exam. The following tips are derived from my experiences reading thousands of UDWPE essays.

1. Review the online scoring guide and the online sample essays (see the URL above). Even better, write a sample answer to the sample question using the same exam logistics and time requirements of the actual exam. You can even discuss your paper with me afterwards, and we can go over it in my office for issues of composition, prose, and rhetoric.
2. In the month before the exam, try to read a book. A non-fiction book on the New York Times bestseller list would do just fine, but one that supplements your GE or business core coursework would be better. Magazine-length articles in *The Atlantic*, *New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair*, *Harpers*, or even *Rolling Stone* are also useful because you can see how an argument is fully developed. Critical reading will help you be a better writer especially in the areas of general vocabulary, sentence-level construction, and the rhetorical devices by which “themes” are developed by professional writers.
3. In the week before the exam, try to spend 30 minutes each day with the newspaper—for example, the *Los Angeles Times* or the *Wall Street Journal* (as a COBAE student, you should be regularly reading the *Wall Street Journal* anyway). This isn’t so that you can anticipate the specific topic (writing prompt); the larger issue is that you will be more fluent in current events in general. This background knowledge will also help with drawing analogies. Also, each day make sure you read at least one editorial on the opinion page.

You don't have to agree with the author of the opinion piece—your task is to get a feel for how one crafts a persuasive argument in a 1000 words or so.

4. For 3-5 min. before you start writing, brainstorm and outline your thoughts.
5. Make the first paragraph the most important paragraph of the essay. It should catch the reader's attention, identify your position or thesis, guide the reader as to what you intend to do in the subsequent paragraphs, demonstrate strong college-level vocabulary, and be free of language use errors. Make the reader's life easy. Construct a first paragraph that is so good that by the time the reader has reached the end of that first paragraph, she or he implicitly assigns a 6 (the highest score) or a 5 (the second highest score) in her or his head to the essay.
6. Ensure that you take a position on the subject (writing prompt). Taking a position will 1), help you explore individual ideas in support of your overall position, and 2), help you demonstrate direction and resolve in thinking. The UDWPE faculty want to see depth and rationale flow naturally from your writing. Also, perhaps in less detail than support for your own position, provide any reasonable counter-arguments or opposite perspectives. Providing alternate viewpoints—even when you perceive these opposing viewpoints are weaker than your argument—is an essential element in demonstrating clear, objective, multi-perspective thinking.
7. A common trap, especially if you have experience in the area of the writing prompt, is to write excessively about yourself. Informally, some UDWPE Faculty refer to this kind of paper as a “me” paper. You can use your own personal experiences as anecdotal evidence, but don't make your personal experience the centerpiece of your argument. Just know that you need to actively resist the temptation to write about yourself. One problem is that it takes up valuable writing time and space. Another problem is a UDWPE reader might infer (perhaps incorrectly) that the writer has difficulty understanding the world's problems, or cannot generalize a solution in a broad, repeatable context. On this particular exam, you have to show that you can “think beyond yourself.”
8. Another common trap, especially if you have little confidence either in your writing skills or your ability to influence others in a professional way, is to write excessively about the case writing text itself. Informally, some UDWPE Faculty refer to this kind of paper as an “echo” paper. That is, the bulk of the your writing is more about you echoing, or “repeating”, the text in the case article than it is about you introducing original thoughts. You can use text in the case as evidence, of course, but don't make such text the majority of your argument. Just know that the UDWPE faculty are—very much—expecting you to offer your own thoughts, observations, and reasoning. CSUN expects its graduates to become social and economic leaders. One thing, among

many, that leaders do is that they influence ideas and policy at multiple levels. You need to know that this crucial task of personal and professional life is chiefly done by expressing one's thoughts well.

9. Remember that your ideas should have strong cohesion *within* a paragraph, and strong coupling *between* paragraphs. Try to keep each paragraph to one broad idea, but that idea should support, of course, your overall thesis. Strong cohesion within a paragraph is also referred to as "unity". Try, if you can remember, to transition between paragraphs in a clear way. This can be hard to do on a timed, in-person essay, but again, it's just more writing skill that successful individuals have mastered.
10. Most of the UDWPE readers are English faculty, or at a minimum, faculty who are extraordinarily passionate about reading and writing. So be shrewd; play to those strengths. Educated individuals use strong analogies well. Draw an *analogy* between something in your experience or college coursework and your argument narrative regarding the writing prompt to strengthen your position. Demonstrate easily and visibly that you can write at the college level. If you don't know what an analogy is then studying and practicing how to make a strong analogy is one of your first homework assignments after you finish reading this document.
11. In the UDWPE, mechanics and grammar count less than they might in a regular college course. The reasons for this are that 1), the UDWPE is a handwritten, timed assignment that you haven't seen before, and 2) you don't have days to review and rewrite your essay. However, you should still save a couple of minutes at the end of your writing to review your work and make composition and prose adjustments as needed (even if it is just crossing out and changing a word, changing punctuation, or adding a new sentence). Just try to avoid common language use and grammar errors, such as run-on sentences, errors in subject-verb agreement, heterograph (homonym) errors, and errors in possessives. If you are unfamiliar with these terms, then, again, study and practice ahead of time. If this sounds like homework, it is indeed.
12. Finally, penmanship matters. Making hard work for the UDWPE readers has the potential to reduce your score. Why frustrate the reader unnecessarily? The best way to eliminate this issue is to practice writing the exam at least once. Also, make sure you use a #2 (sharp) pencil. If the writing is too faint, it makes the UDWPE reader's job that much more difficult.