

Tips for passing the Upper Division Writing Proficiency Exam
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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 many UDWPE papers.

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 run your paper by me afterwards, and we can go over it in my office as necessary 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*, or *Harpers* 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 an 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, 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) 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 that support that overall position, and 2), help you demonstrate direction and resolve in thinking. The UDWPE faculty want to see that kind of depth and rationale flow naturally from your writing. Also, perhaps in less detail than support for your own position, provide counter-arguments or opposite perspectives. Providing alternate viewpoints—even when these counter-argument is 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, 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. 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 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, 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 anecdotal evidence, of course, but don't make such text the centerpiece of your argument. Just know that the UDWPE faculty are—very much—expecting you to offer your 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. This 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 each idea should support your overall thesis. Strong cohesion within a paragraph is also referred to as "unity".
 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. Draw an *analogy* between something in your experience or college coursework to support your position on the specific writing subject. 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 your first homework assignment after you finish reading this document.
 11. In the UDWPE, mechanics and grammar count less than they might in a regular college course. The reason for this is that the UDWPE is a handwritten, timed assignment that you haven't seen before. 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 just by crossing out a word or changing punctuation). 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.
 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.