

Chapter 7

ACT Write: The First Words on Essay Writing

In This Chapter

- ▶ Learning the ten major writing errors to avoid in your writing
- ▶ Understanding the ACT scoring system
- ▶ Viewing sample essays

The writing portion of the ACT is optional, meaning you have the choice of spending an extra 30 minutes at the testing center (How lucky for you!). Although it's optional, three-quarters of the colleges and universities require this section of the ACT, so it's in your best interest to take this section. Taking this part of the test and assuming your college is going to require it is better than not having a score to submit. In other words, take the darn test. You have *nothing* to lose if your university doesn't want it, and *everything* to lose if it does. In this chapter you'll find out about frequent pitfalls you can expect in writing and what scoring system the ACT people use, and you'll read sample essays that have received scores ranging from one to six.

If you're already an excellent writer, which most of you probably are, this chapter gives you the added confidence you need to understand the ACT essay. If you're not the greatest writer, as many students are not, don't despair. That's what we're here for. This chapter teaches you the writing skills and builds up your confidence so you can use them! Seeing how other people have done it makes beginning to write easier. As a result, we included sample essays with low scores for you to laugh at (don't worry, we don't include their names) and essays with high scores for you to learn from. Generally, test-takers are provided with a point-counterpoint topic and asked to write about one side or the other. For information on how the essay test is administered, see Chapter 8.

Rattle Your Writing with Some Loose Screws

Relax. You've been writing since first grade, you have something to say, and this test is a way to prove that. All you need is a quick refresher. Although you may be scared to death of putting your ideas on paper with your name clearly indicated at the top (ooooohh, how we hate to be judged), relax, your name is only on the first page and the ACT scoring folks don't know what you look like. Before you start, though, here are some things to consider and remember to keep you from making the most common mistakes in essay writing. Keep these things in mind, and you'll write the best darn essay ever.

We know you can do it. Here we go . . .

Thought diarrhea: Writing before you think

If you have no destination, you're bound to get lost. The most important part of your essay is having structure and a clear idea of where you're going. If you put your pen to the paper without knowing what the heck you're going to say, you can bet your bottom dollar that the ACT folks won't know what you're saying either. Plan, plan, plan. Thought diarrhea, or writing just to be writing, leads to loose essays, and no one wants to read that mess. Besides that kind of running off at the ink pen makes your writing stink. Creating a solid essay that has a clear organizational plan, however, will get you a high score.

The attack of the clock: Panicking about time

Writer's block, when you simply can't think of anything to put down, often occurs in stressful situations and frequently is caused by a time crunch. You have 30 full minutes to complete the writing portion of the ACT. That's plenty of time to read the question, organize your thoughts, write, and do a quick edit. We suggest that taking 2 minutes to read the question, 3 minutes to write your thesis and hook, 5 minutes to organize your thoughts, 17 minutes to write, and 3 minutes to edit and proofread is an easy breakdown of the 30 minutes. Panicking takes 30 minutes just to get over, and by then, your time's up!

Being too relaxed: Not noticing your time limit

Be aware of your time but don't panic. We know, that's easier said than done. But remember that the ACT people know that you don't have enough time to write the great American novel. However, they expect you to produce a good, concise essay in the time that's allotted. It's important for you to start right away, use your time wisely, and stick to the time schedule. You won't have any time for deep, inner reflection, so don't waste it. You have a time limit; stick to it.

Expressing your inner poet: Using creativity as a crutch

College admissions offices are looking for your creative individualism, but the folks at the ACT are looking for an essay. The ACT writing test gives you a prompt, or topic, to write about. It is very specific, but it isn't the time to write a novel, a journal entry, or a poem. Although you may think you're being creative and impressive, the real creativity lies in impressing them with your writing skills. The ACT writing test is the time to conform to the model of what the test-makers want (which is an organized, thought-out essay that answers the question that they originally asked you), but you still can throw a dose of *you* into the essay by using unique examples. The structure and the language of the essay need not be in a creative format. Do what the test-makers want, so you get the score you want.

Big words with big consequences: Using words you don't know

Nobody can be Shakespeare, especially in 30 minutes, not even Bill himself. When writing the ACT, you won't have the thesaurus button on your word processor in front of you. The worst thing you can do is use words that you think sound good, but you're not really sure what they

mean. Instead of trying to use words that you don't know, impress the ACT readers with your thoughts and your ability to communicate clearly. Using words you don't know or quite understand, may give the ACT graders a laugh, but *you* won't be laughing when you see your score.

Expecting perfection in 30 minutes: Being overcritical of yourself

Nobody writes the perfect essay in 30 minutes. Nobody! The graders know that. Trying to be obsessively perfect does you more harm than good. If you spend too much time critiquing yourself, the ACT graders won't have anything to critique. You still can get a perfect score in 30 minutes, if you follow the suggestions and format in this book. Watch your time, stay organized, express yourself clearly (and in your own words) and you *can* get the perfect score, even though you can do better when given more time.

Speaking another language: Dude, they want to read English

We all know that speaking is much easier than writing. However, this test is neither the time nor the place to impress the test-makers with your street vocabulary, dude. Whatever you do, don't drop it like it's hot, don't think you're too cool for school, don't think you're kinda-like the, like, greatest, or like "ohmygod" this is so cool, or else it's your bad. In other words, you're not l'ming, you're not talking to your best friends, and you're not trying to communicate on the playground. You are writing for a bunch of old fogies who have no idea what the latest slang means, dude. (By the way, don't ever use "dude" in your essay, dude.) Make sure that you're using words that your grandparents understand.

Being a wimp: Not taking a solid stand

Our definition of wimp is being indecisive. If you don't take a solid position with your writing, you're going to get knocked down by the graders. You may read a question and think you can justify it in a few different ways, but nobody ever plays for two opposing teams. Don't be scared of picking a side even though you don't believe it. Sometimes you have to lie. The ACT people won't know that you're lying. They only care that you sound confident and that you can support yourself. Choose your thesis based on the amount of ideas you have to back it up, and your solid thesis and back-up punches will give you a winning score.

You are not an island: Forgetting that people really read this stuff

The weekend before the ACT, you may be picketing your local politician, participating in a hunger strike for the dying kids in Africa, or living in the trees to save the forests from corporate logging. However, the ACT essay is not a forum for political activism. Remember, the people who score your essay come from all walks of life. You don't want to become too controversial and risk angering the reader so that it can affect your score. Remember that real people are reading your essay from their points of view and your score may reflect their counterintuitions. Steer clear of controversy.

Do not do not repeat yourself: 'nuff said

One of the biggest mistakes that you can make on the ACT writing test is saying the same thing again and again in different words. Don't try to lengthen your essay by repeating yourself. The test-graders got it at the first sentence. If you find yourself repeating sentences for lack of things to say, then you've chosen the wrong topic. The way to avoid this mistake is by organizing your thoughts and coming up with specific and different examples to prove your thesis *before* writing your essay.

Leaving the bathroom with TP on your shoe: Not editing your essay

The most embarrassing thing that can happen to you on that perfect first date is your date noticing that you have toilet paper sticking to your shoe. Date over. To counteract potential faux pas like that, make sure that you double-check you shoes before leaving the bathroom — hence a skill that can be applied to your ACT writing. (At last, a real-world skill you can finally use.) Leave yourself time to proofread and check your essay for any obvious sentence structure errors, spelling mistakes, lack of clarity, punctuation, repetition, and illegible handwriting. It helps you to avoid veritable TP that's stuck to your writing. Proofreading and editing are the essential double-checking that you need to do before you walk out the door.

Making the Grade: How the ACT Folks Are Going to Score You

You'll be happy to know that you personally receive not one, but two, yes two, trained readers who will score your essay. And it gets better . . . if the first two don't agree, you personally receive a third, yes third, reader all to yourself. Aren't you special? The ACT guys sure think you are. Not only will you be fortunate enough to receive a numerical score, you even have the pleasure of reading the graders' individual comments on your writing. And yes, those comments appear on your high school and college reports. So, we better get cracking . . .

Here's the skinny on the scoring:

Two readers read your essay and each assigns a numerical grade from 1 to 6. The sum of those ratings is a student's Writing Test Subscore (2 to 12). If you take the writing test, the ACT people report the score as a Combined English/Writing Score. The English test contributes two-thirds and the writing test contributes one-third toward the combined English/Writing score. If you choose not to take this writing test, your score is reported only as the English subscore. The absence of the writing test score won't affect your score in any other area.

Example Essays and Their Scores

The ACT essay is scored from one to six. One is the lowest score you can achieve, and a six is the highest score. One of the best ways to avoid the common mistakes associated with receiving the lower scores is to read examples of all possible grades. After reading the examples

we've created, you will have a much better idea what to avoid in your writing. This next section explains what it takes to get the highest possible scores on your essay. You also get a chance to see samples of each scored essay so that you're better prepared. Feel free to laugh at the ones with lower scores. We did.

The ACT gives you a long-winded prompt for you to write about. Here's the prompt and six sample essays:

Example Prompt

In some high schools, many teachers and parents have encouraged the school to adopt a dress code that sets guidelines for what students can wear in the school building. Some teachers and parents support a dress code because they think it will improve the learning environment in the school. Other teachers and parents do not support a dress code because they think it restricts the individual student's freedom of expression. In your opinion, should high schools adopt dress codes for students?

In your essay, take a position on the question. You may write about either one of the two points of view given, or you may present a different point of view on this question. Use specific reasons and examples to support your position.



Remember it doesn't matter which side you choose to write about. Picking one or the other won't matter in the ACT graders' eyes. All that matters is that you pick one side and support your opinion.

1 — 1 is the loneliest number: How not to be a 1

I think students should have a dress code. There is a lot of gangsters at my school that where there pants to low and I don't really like it. If we had a dress code they wouldn't be allowed to do it. Girls should be able to wear shirts that show their stomach though since it looks good and everyone else likes it. There should also be a dress code for really stupid fashion. This should be imposed on teachers too. And principles. I think this is only fair. Why should we have to be the only ones who who have to have a dress code.

Being number 1 may be great for high school football, but it isn't great on your ACT test. This writer answered the question and chooses a side, but she did not support or back up her statement. Not only does she not support herself, she goes off on a tangent and wanders throughout the essay. Her lack of focus, irreverent examples, and her manner or writing like she speaks is going to get her a 1 on the test. Oh, and by the way, the number of spelling and word errors takes away from her ideas, is distracting, and definitely influences the way the graders look at her paper.

2 — 2 little 2 late: Steer clear of coming in second

I don't agree with the teachers and parents who think we should have a dress code. Our style of dress is what makes us individuals and sets us apart form each other.

At my school students who dress in certain ways find others who are like them. You always know who is interested in the same stuff as you by what they wear. Imposing a dress code doesn't allow us to make friendships with people you are like ourselves.

Uniforms would make people mad. Teachers would find it hard to control all their students because students would want to rebel. Kids wouldn't be able to find friends who are like them and this would cause them to rebel.

These are just a few reasons why we should not have a dress code at school. There are many more reasons than just these but these are the most important.

To ACT graders, a 2 means you show *weak* skill in writing the essay. At least they're saying you have some sort of skill, but it can be improved. This writer answers the question and shows that he can support his point of view, but his lack of organization leaves readers' heads spinning. The writer has paragraph structure in this essay, with clear indentations, an introductory paragraph and conclusion, but transitioning between the two paragraphs is missing. His simple sentence structures let everyone know that his writing skill may not be as high as it should be. A 2 may be better than a 1, but it isn't a score for which you should strive.

3 — *Still on the wrong side of the tracks*

In my opinion, kids should not have a dress code because it takes away freedoms that they should have. There are some clothing styles that teenagers wear that are not appropriate like tight revealing clothes. But to make students buy certain clothes like blue pants and white shirt infringes on their rights.

In America freedom of expression is very important and by forcing us to wear certain things schools are taking away one of our rights. If they start taking away this right, they might start taking away other ones too.

Dress codes are unfair because some families cannot afford them. Many kids would need a whole new wardrobe and their families would have a hard time buying this for them. Not only would they need clothes, but they also need clothes for outside of school. For poorer families this would be hard.

A dress code would take away some of our freedom of expression and it would be a financial strain for poorer families. I think that there should be no dress code.

A 3 is almost a reason for celebration. Almost. This writer answers the question, gives reasons to support the ideas, and then gives even further reasoning to help with the argument. She has structure, maintains focus in her paragraphs, and has sentences that are longer than the ones written by eighth-graders. However, she's still hanging around on the wrong side of the tracks. The ACT folks are starting to recognize her developing skill, but she's still growing. They want her to include some counterarguments and fully develop her ideas. Her paragraphs are not complete, and she does not include the transitions that she needs to help her essay flow. Ideas are logically grouped, but not logically displayed. With a little work, this essay can make it to the right side of the tracks.

4 — *The grass is greener on this side*

I believe that it would be a good idea for our schools to adopt dress codes. Some people argue that it would restrict student's freedom of expression, but I do not agree with this position. It is important that we have a right to express ourselves, but our society does not allow us to have unrestricted freedoms like this all the time. It is important to learn discipline, show respect for other's feelings and learn how to be successful operating in the real world. Dress codes create a better learning environment and also helps students prepare for their futures.

The most important benefit of imposing dress codes would be creating a better school environment. Students who are trying to concentrate and learn would be unfocused because of inappropriate clothing. Small clothing, tight tops, and sagging pants might be okay for after school but not appropriate for the classroom. Certain types of people might find profanity and obscene images offensive. Art and creative writing are better ways to express your creativity rather than on your clothing. Less distractions in the classroom would help a student to get a better education.

Another important benefit of having a dress code would teach students how to dress properly for different occasions. Clothes that you would wear to a party would not be appropriate for a dinner with your boyfriend's parents. Likewise, you wouldn't wear your work clothes on a date. Some jobs in society require people to wear uniforms. Dress codes in schools help students to realize what the world is like and get ready to enter it.

Another important concern for students is trying to fit in. Dress codes take the emphasis off what you look like and put more emphasis on learning.

In conclusion, it is important for schools to adopt dress codes. Getting an education is the most important thing about school and dress codes take away distractions. Learning how to dress for the real world is also important. And it helps with the pressures of trying to fit in.

A score of 4 would make anyone want to run and frolic through green pastures, because the ACT folks think you have *adequate* writing skills. You may not be the best, but at least you're average and your score is respectable. This writer takes a stance and acknowledges counter-arguments. Focus is maintained throughout the essay, and each idea in the better defined paragraphs is developed enough to make the graders happy. This writer demonstrates a simple organizational structure that works with an introduction and a conclusion that balance out the essay. ACT graders like the appropriate word choice and the ability of the writer to demonstrate language control. This score shows that the writer learned his skills in school, even though he may not become the next Shakespeare.

5 — *Star material: Five-star winners*

There is a debate now amongst parents and teachers about whether or not a dress code should be used in schools. I agree with the position that believes that it will improve the learning environment in our schools. I think a dress code would significantly improve the excellence of our education. First, students would be able to focus on academics rather than the social facet of school. Second, the appearance of the school would improve and third, students would be better prepared for the working world.

The most crucial benefit of implementing a dress code would be to significantly reduce the distractions in the classroom. For students to be successful in the future it is important that we concentrate on the material being taught in the classroom. It is difficult to do this when you overhear students whispering about their newest Gucci purse or admiring their best friend's Prada shoes. Young people place such an emphasis on style and image rather than substance. In addition, students see school as a social venue rather than a learning environment.

Secondly, if the students and faculty are well groomed I believe that it improves the aesthetic appeal of the school. Formal attire is not necessary to achieve this. For example, requiring long pants and a collared shirt would be sufficient. Not only would the school look more professional, it would change the character of the school. Holding students to a higher standard would require them to do it for themselves. It would improve their maturity level as well.

Finally, supporting a dress code would prepare today's youth for the work of their future. A plethora of jobs require uniforms or a standard dress code. I think it is important for schools to not only prepare students academically for their future, but also in proper conduct and grooming. Just because someone has impressive qualifications doesn't mean they'll be hired if they look like they just rolled in from the beach. Allowing students to dress however they choose might eventually be harmful to their future success.

The opposing view feels that a dress code would hinder a student's freedom of expression, but I still think a dress code is a good idea. A dress code addresses the important issues at hand while at the same time allowing the student to find more appropriate ways of expression. It would be different if you could not paint or write creativity the way you chose in school because that would affect your freedom of expression.

In conclusion, I strongly support the idea of a dress code. Not only does it improve our learning environment but it also improves the character of the school and readies the student for a successful future.

A score of 5 gets you a gold star on the blackboard! It isn't ACT perfection, but it's pretty darn close. This writer was able to effectively address the issue by clearly answering the question and by addressing the counterargument. This essay is organized and fluid and contains a variety of specific examples. The ideas in each paragraph are developed and support the argument. This writer explores a cultural component that shows advanced critical thinking skills and displays a mastery of vocabulary and precise word choice.

6 — *You unlocked the code: A perfect score*

The trend of inappropriate dress in our schools is causing alarm in our parents and educators. This population argues that inappropriate clothes is distracting in the classroom and interferes in the learning environment. They also believe that adopting a dress code would establish guidelines and frameworks for what students should and should not wear on campus. The opposing view believes that a dress code would hinder the student's freedom of expression.

When freedom of expression begins to interfere with appropriate and clear education in the classroom, we have a serious dilemma and the issue needs to be addressed. Obviously in our schools, the lack of a dress code is not working. We are not breaking new ground when we suggest that the fashion that is spewed upon our youth in the mass media is riddled with sexual undertones. Examples of this can be seen in every teen magazine, every youth oriented television program and on the most popular of music videos. Further, what advertisers would consider benign, stimulates and raises the hormone levels of every young male. In our classrooms this can be very distracting. The only solution to help create an environment where learning takes precedence is to adopt school uniforms. Obviously, a uniform policy would be easier to enforce than a dress code, and would bring many advantages to the entire academic population.

First and foremost, uniforms would help students to fight the materialistic world's values. Our society feels that designer labels, such as Gucci, Louis Vuitton, and Hilfinger create self worth and that without these, a person is open to cruel comments and non-acceptance. Many students cannot afford to "buy" their self worth and are required to rise above the standards our society and media feeds them. As a teenager, acceptance is the most crucial aspect of their daily lives, and school uniforms take away the financial burden that our society imposes upon them. Although uniforms need purchasing, it carries with it a minimal financial burden compared to overly high-priced current designer wear that students will ask for.

Uniforms could also help curb gang related violence that occurs in many of our nation's schools. Specific colors, logos and signs have all been adopted into the lifestyle of gang members and each carry their own significance. What was once an ordinary red shirt, could now be considered an intentional bullet fired in a gang battle. Uniforms decrease the division lines between gangs, as well as protect students who are ignorant to the unwritten laws that govern gangs.

For myself, uniforms would dramatically decrease the amount of time I spent preparing for my day. No longer would I need to delve into the bottom of my closet to find an outfit that I haven't worn this week. I do not need to worry that I my best friend might come to school in the same outfit as me, because uniforms ensure that they will! Uniforms give me extra time to finish the homework I haven't done, rather than spend it worrying about my wardrobe.

Certainly no one is proclaiming that uniforms are the solution to all school-wide problems. There are still wide spread school related issues that could never be fixed with clothes. Safety concerns, educational standards, bullying, and health related issues are areas that need further research. However, uniforms do help to ensure a learning environment that is free from distractions and fosters creative expression in areas of importance.

So, in conclusion, I highly value the worth of uniforms and feel they should be enforced throughout the entire school district. Solving problems in the entire district would help ensure a safer community, save us all money, and give us all some well needed extra time in the morning.

The secret to your success on the ACT is a 6, and with an essay like this, you can earn it. The ACT graders are practically drooling over this writer's style, because it recognizes the complexity of the issue, creates a stunning thesis, and then supports it with well-thought-out and varied examples. She argues her side well, and includes arguments from opposing points of view. Her structure and organization is logical, and she includes transitions between all of her paragraphs. Her writing displays her own unique wit and personality, which she masterfully executes in her essay. The ACT graders practically fell over in their seats when they stumbled upon her words and her ability to use them. In 30 minutes, this writer glided through the essay with eloquence and thoroughness that left the ACT graders stunned. She deserved the 6.

