

CAAP Writing Skills & Writing Essay Tests Summary

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Introduction

The Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP) is a standardized, nationally-normed assessment program from ACT that enables postsecondary institutions to assess, evaluate, and enhance student learning outcomes and general education program outcomes. There are six different CAAP tests that institutions can choose to administer: Reading, Writing Skills, Writing Essay, Mathematics, Science, and Critical Thinking.

Owens adopted the CAAP Writing Skills and Writing Essay tests in the Fall of 2002, and they are administered every year to students enrolled in randomly-chosen sections of English 112. The CAAP Writing Skills Test is 40 minutes in length and includes 72 items that measure students' understanding of the conventions of standard written English in punctuation, grammar, sentence structure, strategy, organization, and style. Spelling, vocabulary, and rote recall of rules of grammar are not tested. The Writing Skills Test consists of six prose passages, each of which is accompanied by a set of 12 multiple-choice test items. A range of passage types is used to provide a variety of rhetorical situations. A sample passage with test items is provided in Appendix A.

The Writing Essay test is 40 minutes in length and includes two 20-minute writing tasks defined by a short prompt that identifies a specific hypothetical situation and audience. The hypothetical situation involves an issue on which the examinee must take a stand. An examinee is instructed to take a position on the issue and to explain to the audience why the position taken is the better (or best) alternative. Situations and audiences defined in the writing prompts are constructed so that the required background knowledge and experience are within the command of college sophomores. The two writing tasks are scored through a holistic scoring system. Essays are evaluated according to how well a student formulates a clear assertion on the issue defined by the prompt, supports that assertion with reasons and evidence appropriate to the position taken and the specified concerns of the audience, and develops the argument in a coherent and logical manner. A sample of the written essay instructions and prompt is in Appendix B.

Writing Skills Test

As indicated in Table 1, test questions fall into two major categories: Usage/Mechanics composed of 32 test questions (44% of questions) and Rhetorical Skills composed of 40 test questions (56% of questions). Subcategories exist for each major category. In the Usage/Mechanics category, 6 test questions (8% of questions) assess punctuation -- the use and placement of commas, colons, semicolons, dashes, parentheses, apostrophes, and quotation, question, and exclamation marks; 8 questions (11% of questions) assess grammar -- adjectives and adverbs, conjunctions, and agreement between subject and verb and between pronouns and their antecedents; and 18 questions (25% of questions) assess sentence structure -- the relationships between/among clauses, placement of modifiers, and shifts in construction. In the Rhetorical Skills category, 15 questions (21%

of questions) assess strategy, the appropriateness of expression in relation to audience and purpose, strengthening of writing with appropriate supporting material, and effective choice of statements of theme and purpose. Ten questions (14% of questions) assess organization, the organization of ideas and relevance of statements in context (order, coherence, unity). Fifteen questions (21% of questions) assess style, the precision and appropriateness in the choice of words and images, rhetorically effective management of sentence elements, avoidance of ambiguous pronoun references, and economy in writing.

Table 1. Content Specifications Summary for the CAAP Writing Skills Test

Content Category	Proportion of Test	Number of Items
Usage/Mechanics	.44	32
Punctuation	.08	6
Grammar	.11	8
Sentence Structure	.25	18
Rhetorical Skills	.56	40
Strategy	.21	15
Organization	.14	10
Style	.21	15
Total	1.00	72

Methodology

In December 2010, the Writing Skills and Essay Tests were administered to students in randomly selected sections of English 112. A total of 235 students were enrolled in the selected sections during Fall 2010. Eighty-two students completed the writing skills test, resulting in a response rate of 35% and an 8.8% margin of error¹. Sixty-nine students completed the Writing Essay Test, resulting in a response rate of 29% and a 9.9% margin of error. Students enrolled in English 112 have already demonstrated competence at basic writing skills. Table 2 shows the self-reported demographic characteristics of the Writing Skills Test respondents. The self-reported demographics for the Writing Essay respondents were not available from ACT.

¹ The margin of error is a statistic that reflects the amount of sampling error in a survey's results and is based on the size of the sample (n=82) for Writing Skills, and (n=69) for Writing Essay in relation to the size of the population (N=1,382) students enrolled in all sections of the surveyed courses during the Fall of 2009. The lower the margin of error, the more confidence one can have that the data are representative of the full population. Ideally, the margin of error should be 5% or less. The way to reduce the margin of error is to increase the sample size (i.e., survey more students).

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Writing Skills Test Respondents, Fall 2010

	#	%		#	%		#	%
Ethnicity			Status			Major		
African-American/Black	11	13%	Full Time	55	67%	Undecided	3	4%
American Indian/ Alaskan Native	1	1%	Part Time	11	13%	Agriculture	1	1%
White/Caucasian	47	57%	No response	16	20%	Architecture	0	0%
Mexican American/ Chicano	3	4%				Biological Sciences	0	0%
Asian/Pacific Islander	0	0%	Cumulative GPA			Business	14	17%
Puerto Rican/Cuban/Hispanic	0	0%	Below 2.00	3	4%	Office Management	1	1%
Filipino	0	0%	2.01 - 2.50	16	20%	Marketing and Purchasing	0	0%
Other	0	0%	2.51 - 3.00	13	16%	Communications	0	0%
Prefer not to respond	6	7%	3.01 - 3.50	18	22%	Community Services	4	5%
No response	14	17%	3.51 and above	11	13%	Computer and Info Sciences	3	4%
			No Response	21	26%	General Studies	0	0%
Gender						Education	5	6%
Male	35	43%	Rank (Self-Reported)			Engineering	0	0%
Female	34	41%	Freshman	25	31%	Fine & Applied Arts	3	4%
No response	13	16%	Sophomore	27	33%	Foreign Languages	0	0%
			Junior	6	7%	Health Professions	12	15%
Age			Senior	1	1%	Home Economics	0	0%
18 and under	13	16%	Other	1	1%	Letters	0	0%
19-20	23	28%	No response	22	27%	Mathematics	0	0%
21-25	13	16%				Philosophy/Religion	0	0%
26-30	14	17%	Enrolled At Owens as Freshman			Physical Sciences	2	2%
31-39	13	16%	Yes	54	66%	Social Sciences	1	1%
40 and older	6	7%	No	11	13%	Trade and Industrial	4	5%
No response	0	0%	No response	17	21%	No response	29	35%

Summary of Writing Skills Test Results

As a general guide, differences in scores should be interpreted based on the standard deviations of the score distribution. Standard deviations are a measure of variation in the data such that 68% of scores fall within one standard deviation of the mean, 95% fall within two standard deviations, and 98% are within three. For the writing skills test, the national mean is 61.8, one standard deviation is between 56.9 – 66.7 (61.8 ± 4.9), two standard deviations are between 52.0 - 71.6 (61.8 ± 9.8), and three standards deviations are between 47.1 – 76.5 (61.8 ± 14.7). The mean for the Usage/Mechanics Subtest is 16.0 with a standard deviation of ± 2.4 . The mean for the Rhetorical Skills Subtest is 16.0 with a standard deviation of ± 2.6 . Differences of less than one standard deviation are considered negligible, differences between one and two standard deviations are considered moderate, and differences between two and three or more standard deviations are considered substantial.

Based on this guide, the results, displayed below in Table 3, show that Owens students differed very little from the national average, that there has been very little change

between 2005 and 2010, and that there are few differences exhibited by any of the demographic groups.

Table 3: Average Writing Skills Scores by Student Group: Owens 2005 to 2010 vs. National Average

	2005		2006		2007		2008		2009		2010		2010 National Average	
	Avg.	#	Avg.	#	Avg.	#	Avg.	#	Avg.	#	Avg.	#	Avg.	S.D.
Overall	60.8	74	61.3	75	60.8	88	60.1	120	59.6	96	60.2	82	61.8	4.9
Ethnicity														
African-American/Black		2		1	56.0	7	57.0	12	54.0	8	57.0	11	NA	NA
American Indian/Alaskan Native		0		0		2		2		2		1	NA	NA
White/Caucasian	61.0	55	61.0	57	62.0	54	61.0	70	61.0	65	61.0	47	NA	NA
Mexican American/Chicano		4		4		3	62.0	5	57.0	6		3	NA	NA
Asian/Pacific Islander		1						1		1		0	NA	NA
Puerto Rican/Cuban/Hispanic		1						1		1		0	NA	NA
Filipino		0		0		0		0		0		0	NA	NA
Other		2		3		0		2	58.0	5		0	NA	NA
Prefer not to respond		1	64.0	5		1	61.0	6		4	63.0	6	NA	NA
No response	61.0	8	64.0	5	61.0	21	59.0	21		4	61.0	14	NA	NA
Gender														
Male	61.0	23	60.0	30	61.0	27	59.0	41	59.0	37	60.0	35	NA	NA
Female	61.0	51	62.0	41	61.0	45	61.0	63	60.0	58	61.0	34	NA	NA
No Response		5		4	60.0	16	60.0	16		1	61.0	13	NA	NA
Age														
18 and under	64.0	13	63.0	8	61.0	24	60.0	25	59.0	7	62.0	13	NA	NA
19-20	59.0	29	61.0	20	59.0	24	60.0	36	60.0	15	59.0	23	NA	NA
21-25	63.0	14	61.0	19	62.0	20	59.0	27	59.0	35	61.0	13	NA	NA
26-30	61.0	7	63.0	12		4	62.0	16	60.0	12	61.0	14	NA	NA
31-39	60.0	7	60.0	9	61.0	7	63.0	5	60.0	13	59.0	13	NA	NA
40 and older		4	60.0	7	61.0	9	59.0	11	58.0	14	59.0	6	NA	NA
No response		0		0		0		0		0		0		
Rank (Self-Reported)														
Freshman	63.0	27	62.0	29	61.0	29	62.0	36	61.0	38	60.0	25	61.8	4.9
Sophomore	60.0	41	61.0	32	61.0	30	60.0	45	60.0	34	59.0	27	61.8	4.9
Junior		4		4		4		3	58.0	12	61.0	6	NA	NA
Senior		0		3		1		2		3		1	NA	NA
Other		1		1		1		3		4		1	NA	NA
No response		1	65.0	6	60.0	23	59.0	31	55.0	5	61.0	22	NA	NA
Enrolled At Owens as Freshman														
Yes	61.0	69	60.0	59	61.0	55	61.0	74	60.0	79	60.0	54	NA	NA
No		4	65.0	9	61.0	11	57.0	11	59.0	15	60.0	11	NA	NA
No response		1	64.0	7	60.0	22	59.0	35		2	61.0	17	NA	NA
Status														
Full Time	61.0	53	60.0	40	61.0	53	60.0	77	60.0	66	60.0	55	NA	NA
Part Time	61.0	21	62.0	28	62.0	14	61.0	15	60.0	29	59.0	11	NA	NA
No response		0	64.0	7	60.0	21	59.0	28		1	61.0	16		

Table 3: Average Writing Skills Scores by Student Group: Owens 2005 to 2010 vs. National Average Cont.

	2005		2006		2007		2008		2009		2010		2010 National Average	
	Avg.	#	Avg.	#	Avg.	#	Avg.	#	Avg.	#	Avg.	#	Avg.	S.D.
Cumulative GPA														
Below 2.00	59.0	7		4		4	59.0	5	57.0	9		3	NA	NA
2.01 - 2.50	61.0	15	60.0	9	58.0	15	60.0	22	58.0	22	58.0	16	NA	NA
2.51 - 3.00	60.0	13	60.0	19	61.0	14	60.0	22	59.0	23	60.0	13	NA	NA
3.01 - 3.50	60.0	23	61.0	17	62.0	17	60.0	23	62.0	18	60.0	18	NA	NA
3.51 and above	64.0	15	64.0	17	64.0	13	62.0	11	61.0	18	63.0	11	NA	NA
No Response		1	63.0	9	59.0	25	59.0	37	60.0	6	61.0	21	NA	NA
													NA	NA
Major														
Undecided	63.0	13		1	63.0	5		0		4		3	NA	NA
Agriculture		0		1		0		0		0		1	NA	NA
Architecture		0		1		0		0		1		0	NA	NA
Biological Sciences		1		0		2		0		1		0	NA	NA
Business		4	60.0	14	64.0	8	55.0	7	60.0	11	61.0	14	NA	NA
Office Management		1		1		0		0		1		1	NA	NA
Marketing and Purchasing		0		1		2		0		0		0	NA	NA
Communications		3		0		1		0		4		0	NA	NA
Community Services	60.0	6		2		2		1		3		4	NA	NA
Computer and Info Sciences		4		2		1		2		4		3	NA	NA
General Studies		0		0		1		2		0		0	NA	NA
Education	57.0	8	63.0	7	63.0	5		4	61.0	5	61.0	5	NA	NA
Engineering		4	58.0	5		3		1	59.0	5		0	NA	NA
Fine & Applied Arts		2		0		4		3		2		3	NA	NA
Foreign Languages		0		0		0		0		0		0	NA	NA
Health Professions	61.0	21	63.0	20	60.0	17	61.0	25	60.0	31	59.0	12	NA	NA
Home Economics		0		0		3		2		2		0		
Letters		1		0		0		0		0		0		
Mathematics		0		0		0		0		0		0		
Philosophy/Religion		0		0		1		0		0		0		
Physical Sciences		0		0		0		1		2		2	NA	NA
Social Sciences		2		2		0		4	58.0	8		1	NA	NA
Trade and Industrial		2		1		1		3		0		4	NA	NA
No response		2	60.0	17	59.0	32	60.0	65	58.0	12	60.0	29	NA	NA

NOTES: ACT does not provide data for groups with a sample size of less than 5. National averages are only available in aggregate for freshmen and sophomores.

Table 4: Usage/Mechanics and Rhetorical Skills Sub-scores 2005-2010

	2005		2006		2007		2008		2009		2010		2010 National Average	
	Avg.	#	Avg.	#	Avg.	#	Avg.	#	Avg.	#	Avg.	#	Avg.	S.D.
Usage/Mechanics	15.4	74	15.7	75	15.7	88	15.0	120	15.0	96	15.4	82	16.0	2.4
Rhetorical Skills	15.6	74	15.7	75	15.3	88	15.2	120	14.9	96	15.1	82	16.0	2.6

The only averages greater or less than average ± 4.8 , the standard deviation for 2005-2009, were for African-American/Black students in 2007, 2008, and 2009 (n=7, n=12, and n=8 respectively), students who did not report a rank in 2009 (n=5), and students majoring in Business in 2008 (n=7). However, because the sample sizes for these subgroups are so small and the national norms for these groups are not provided, the results for these groups should be interpreted with extreme caution. In 2010, there were no Owens averages greater than 66.7 or less than 56.9, that is, within one standard deviation of the mean.

Writing Essay Test
Summary of Writing Essay Test Results

For the Writing Essay Test, the national mean is 3.0. One standard deviation is between 2.4 - 3.6 (3.0 ± 0.6), two standard deviations are between 1.8 - 4.2 (3.0 ± 1.2), and three standard deviations are between 1.2 - 4.8 (3.0 ± 1.8). The mean for Essay 1 is 3.0 with a standard deviation of ± 0.7 . The mean for the Essay 2 is 2.9 with a standard deviation of ± 0.7 . Differences of less than one standard deviation are considered negligible, differences between one and two standard deviations are considered moderate, and differences between two and three or more standard deviations are considered substantial.

Based on this guide, the results, displayed below in Table 5, show that for the Writing Essay Test, Owens students differed very little from the national average and that there has been very little change between 2005 and 2010.

Table 5: Average Writing Essay Scores Owens 2005-2010 vs. National Average

	2005		2006		2007		2008		2009		2010		2010 National Average	
	Avg.	#	Avg.	#	Avg.	#	Avg.	#	Avg.	#	Avg.	#	Avg.	S.D.
Overall	3.0	49	2.8	75	2.7	79	2.9	105	2.6	88	2.7	69	3.0	0.6
Essay 1	3.0	49	2.8	75	2.6	79	3.0	105	2.7	88	2.7	69	3.0	0.7
Essay 2	3.0	49	2.8	75	2.8	79	2.8	105	2.6	88	2.8	69	2.9	0.7

Note: Local and national normative data are based on students who completed both essays and have an Essay Composite score

Conclusions and Limitations

Overall, results indicate that:

- Owens students do not differ meaningfully from a national sample of students at other two-year public institutions for the Writing Skills and the Writing Essay Tests
- There was no real change in students’ writing skills or essay writing from 2005 to 2010

- There were no meaningful differences in writing skills among different student groups of Owens students

However, there are several limitations to the data that should be considered in the interpretation and use of results:

- Differences in scores from the national average, from year-to-year, and between groups are statistically very small and well within the normal range. Only differences of one standard deviation or more are unlikely to be due to chance and are of practical significance.
- Results are based on a small sample size (n=82 for Writing Skills Test) and (n=69 for Writing Essay Test) and high margins of error ($\pm 8.8\%$ for the Writing Skills Test and $\pm 9.9\%$ for the Writing Essay Test), indicating that results may not be representative of the full population of students.
- Sample sizes for various student groups are very small and national averages for different student groups are not available; therefore, data by student demographic characteristics should be interpreted very cautiously.

Questions for future research and recommendations for maximizing the usefulness of results:

- Have students who take the CAAP Writing Skills and Writing Essay Tests completed courses that teach the writing skills being assessed?
 - Examine the curriculum map for the general written communication student learning outcome and identify what courses introduce and reinforce written communication skills.
 - Ensure that the CAAP is administered in courses that enroll a large proportion of students who have completed those courses.
 - Order unit-level CAAP data and examine how many test respondents have taken English courses. Perhaps limit the analysis to these students or compare students who have completed the English curriculum to those who have not.
- How do students perform on each of the various content areas of the test?
 - Knowing the average overall writing skills score and the Usage/Mechanics and Rhetorical Skills subtest scores provide a general picture of students' skills. However, it does not provide actionable information for curriculum development and improvement.
 - It is recommended that the Writing Skills Content Analysis report be ordered from CAAP in order to identify strengths or weaknesses in specific writing skills (e.g., punctuation, grammar, sentence structure, strategy, organization, and style). This report also shows the percentage of students who test at each quartile on the test. For continuous improvement, ACT recommends that goals be established between test administrations to move a particular percentage of

students (e.g., 3%) out of the bottom quartile into higher quartiles and develop an action plan to achieve this goal.

- Collect data from a larger sample of students (or collect data every other year with a larger sample), in order to have greater confidence in the representativeness of results and to have sufficient data to permit analysis on different student groups.
- Link the ACT or Compass Writing Scores to the CAAP Writing Skills Score. This comparison will demonstrate the learning gained by taking the English curriculum.

Appendix A

Writing Skills Sample Passage and Items

In the end, everyone gives up jogging. Some find that their strenuous efforts to earn a living **drains (1)** away their energy.

1. A. NO CHANGE
B. drain
C. has drained
D. is draining

Others **suffering from (2)** defeat by the hazards of the course, from hard pavement to muddy tracks, and from smog to sleet and snow.

2. A. NO CHANGE
B. suffered
C. suffer
D. suffering with

These can also (3) collapse in their sneakers.

3. A. NO CHANGE
B. Still others
C. They can also
D. They also can

My experience **having been different (4)**, however; I had a revelation.

4. A. NO CHANGE
B. being different,
C. was a difference,
D. was different,

It happened two summers ago at Lake Tom. I had been accustomed to running every day, but that week I decided to be lazy. I sailed, basked in the sun, and ate wonderfully: **the best meals I've ever eaten (5)**.

5. Which of the following would most specifically illustrate the point that the writer ate wonderfully?

A. NO CHANGE
B. nutritious and healthful meals.
C. lobster, steak, and baked potatoes.
D. breakfast, lunch and dinner.

By the fourth day I had to face the truth: my body was slowly changing to **becoming (6)** dough.

6. A. NO CHANGE
B. become
C. being
D. OMIT the underlined portion.

So I tied on my running shoes and loped out to the main road in search of a five-mile route. **Out of curiosity, I turned onto Lookout Hill Road (7)** and soon discovered how the road had come by its name.

7. A. NO CHANGE
B. Out of curiosity, Lookout Hill Road was turned onto
C. Having become curious, Lookout Hill Road was the route I turned onto
D. Curious, a turning into Lookout Hill Road was what I did,

I was chugging up one of the **longest, steepest (8)** inclines in the region. Perched at the top was a ramshackle house, and only a desire to get a closer look kept me going.

8. A. NO CHANGE
B. longest, steepest,
C. longest steepest,
D. longest and steepest,

I was exhausted when I reached the crest of the hill. There I found a native New Englander rocking on the front porch of the **house, which was painted (9)**. "Mister," I panted, "you sure live on a big hill!"

9. A. NO CHANGE
B. house (painted).
C. house, and it was painted.
D. house.

He studied me closely for a moment and then responded, "Yep, and I've got the good sense not to run up it." **That night I tied the laces of my running shoes around a rock and dropped them in Lake Tom (10)**.

10. Which of the following sentences would provide the conclusion that best supports the point made in the first paragraph that the writer gave up jogging because of a revelation?
- A. NO CHANGE
B. I realized that the New Englander was, indeed, correct, and walked back down the hill.
C. After that, I sat down on the porch and we talked for more than an hour.
D. Jogging may be good for you, but it's also tiring—especially if you jog up hills!

Answers:

1. B. 2. C. 3. B. 4. D. 5. C.
6. D. 7. A. 8. A. 9. D. 10. A.

Appendix B

Writing Essay Sample

Independent Prompt Example

Your college administration is considering whether or not there should be a physical education requirement for undergraduates. The administration has asked students for their views on the issue and has announced that its final decision will be based on how such a requirement would affect the overall educational mission of the college. Write a letter to the administration arguing whether or not there should be a physical education requirement for undergraduates at your college.

(Do not concern yourself with letter formatting; simply begin your letter, "Dear Administration.")

In an actual testing situation, your response will be evaluated by how well you formulate an assertion and support it with a coherent and logical argument.