

HUNTER COLLEGE READING/WRITING CENTER
Writing Across the Curriculum: The CUNY Proficiency Exam (CPE)
Reading Strategies for the Long Reading

As part of the preparation for Task I of the CPE, students are required to read an essay in advance of the exam. This reading, called “Reading Selection A” or “the long reading,” usually runs seven to ten pages. Since Task I asks students to write an essay in which they summarize an aspect of the long reading, relate it to another, shorter reading that they will receive at the exam, and also relate it to their own experience, it should be apparent that students cannot easily pass the CPE without reading and understanding the long reading.*

The readings selected for the long reading tend to fall into a genre that can be called “social critiques.” These essays seek to describe, analyze, and offer opinions about trends that are occurring within contemporary American society. Essays about science are not about scientific theory – they are about the ways people react to or use science. Essays about economics are not about economic theory or statistics – they are about the ways people react to the economy or spend their money. Essays about education are not about educational or pedagogical theory – they are about the ways people teach or learn. All social critiques, no matter the topic, are analyses of people’s behavior. The analysis generally consists of observing human behavior (which tends to be more factual) and of postulating reasons for that behavior (which tends to be more opinion or theory based).

Since these types of essays focus on human behavior, it is important to understand the following:

- 1. *Who* is the author discussing – Everyone? A specific group? An individual person?**
- 2. *What* specific action (or actions) are those people doing?**
- 3. *Why* (according to the author) are they doing that action (or actions)? (Note that there may be more than one reason.)**

Sometimes, authors describe only one group of people. But many other times, authors will introduce a second or third (or fourth, etc) group. If there is more than one group, then identify *who* each group is, *what* each group is doing, and *why* each group acts the way it does.

In nearly all cases, at least one group of people will be constituted of contemporary Americans. Other groups may consist of other Americans (perhaps a smaller, minority, or lesser-known group), or groups from other countries; other contemporary groups, or groups from other periods of history. The main group, the subject of the essay, is the larger and more well-known contemporary American group. Other groups are used for one of two main purposes:

- as a comparison, showing that contemporary American behavior is either just as good (or just as bad) as the behavior of other people.
- as a contrast, showing that contemporary American behavior is either better or worse than the behavior of other people.

It is important to distinguish, however, between a groups being analyzed throughout the whole essay, and groups (or individuals) who are the subject of specific examples used only to illustrate a larger point. If a group recurs throughout the essay, it is an important group; if it appears only once or twice, it is probably only mentioned for explanatory purposes and is less important.

* For more information about the requirements and format of the CPE, please see the student information booklet, available in the Reading/Writing Center, or watch the Center’s online CPE tutorial.

Keep in mind that authors never (or, very, very rarely) simply describe human activity in social critiques. Authors have opinions about the activities they describe. While many authors write in order to criticize something that they perceive as being negative, not all social critiques are criticisms: some are positive. Therefore, it is important for students who are reading the long reading to also understand the following:

4. How does the author feel about the described activity: is it positive? Negative? Mixed?

5. What reasons does the author have for feeling that way?

Sometimes (though, unfortunately, not always), authors will explicitly state how they feel. When they state their opinion outright, they do so in their thesis statement, most often located toward the end of their introduction. (Keep in mind that when an essay is seven to ten pages, the introduction may be longer than a single paragraph: three- to five- (or more) paragraph introductions are common.)

Other times, however, the authors' opinions are only implicit. Yet they always have an opinion, even if they do not say so. When they don't state their opinion, they always leave clues.

- When authors describe the consequences of people's actions, they are usually leaving a clue to their opinion. If most of the consequences are bad, the author has a negative opinion. If most of the consequences are good, the author has a positive opinion. If there are both positive and negative consequences, then the author has a mixed opinion.

Which of the following sentences implies a positive opinion? Which a negative opinion?

- As nuclear technology spreads, more countries will be able to produce cheap, clean energy.
 - As nuclear technology spreads, the risk of a weapon of mass destruction being activated rises.
- Often authors use adjectives and verbs that are not only descriptive but are also loaded with moral implications. If descriptive wording is negative, then the author has a negative opinion. If the wording is positive, then the author has a positive opinion.

Which of the following sentences is positive? Which is negative? Which is neutral?

- Contemporary scientists are changing the genes of corn by inserting insect DNA.
 - Cutting edge scientists are improving the genes of corn by inserting insect DNA.
 - Reckless scientists are corrupting the genes of corn by inserting insect DNA.
- Even when authors have mixed feelings, they still usually take a stand. They tend to acknowledge the other side first, and state their own feelings last.

These sentences offer identical facts about the social phenomenon of lying, yet they imply two very different attitudes toward it. Which is critical and which is apologetic?

- People find it hard to avoid lying sometimes, yet telling a lie can erode trust.
- Telling a lie can erode trust, yet people find it hard to avoid lying sometimes.

Important: Students should always remember to distinguish between their own opinions and the opinions of the author. Students are not required to agree with the opinions of authors, but they are required to understand, and to state, what the authors' opinions are.