

Preparing for the VCLA

James Holsinger, PhD
Writing Center Director
Longwood University

Jennifer Trate
Graduate Assistant
Longwood University

Overview:

Today we will cover:

- General Test-taking tips
- Tips for excelling on timed essay tests (like the VCLA)
- Organizing for a strong essay through pre-writing
- Meeting reader expectations for the VCLA written tests
- Ways to prepare on your own for the VCLA

Warm-Up

- What are your biggest worries regarding the VCLA written test?
- If you've taken the test, what was most challenging?

Test Taking Tips... The Basics

- Practice tests in a similar setting.
- Eat before the test (nothing unusual).
- Get there early.
- GET A FULL NIGHT OF SLEEP BEFORE.
- Wear a watch.
- Scan test first and take mental note of what areas will need more and less time... budget.
- Make sure you keep track of any questions skipped so you can find them again quickly.

Timed Essay Tips... What NOT to do

- Do not write before you know precisely what you want to say and how you're going to support it with details.
- Do not write as much as you possibly can in the time given (*balance quality and quantity*).
- Do not start with an empty statement, use clichéd language, or use complex words just to sound smart.
- Think beyond the standard 5 paragraph essay! You want to structure your paragraphs strategically.

Timed Essay Tips... What TO do

- Read the prompt carefully, and mark and circle keywords. Keywords will be useful to tell you what the essay should emphasize.
- Briefly restate, in your own words, what the prompt is asking.
- Make a clear statement about your point and purpose near the beginning. Continue to support your thesis throughout the essay by providing examples and description. Avoid restating arguments without support.
- Do not worry about spelling and grammatical mechanics at first! Focus on getting down your thoughts but save time to revise later.

What TO do... cont.

- Give examples, hypotheticals, facts, philosophies, comparisons, analogies, and even anecdotes to make concrete the points you're making in those topic sentences.
- At the end, reaffirm your main point and add some new perspective or dimension to what you've already said.
- Answer the right question.
- Revise your thesis statement before you turn in your paper, so it looks like the conclusion you stumbled across was the one you planned from the start. (This small step can often make a huge difference.).

Activity

COMPOSITION EXERCISE

Read the passages below about banning vending machines containing soft drinks and snack foods from public schools; then follow the instructions for writing your composition.

Ban Soft Drinks and Snack Foods from Public Schools

Obesity among young people is a serious public health problem that has been linked to the growing incidence of diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease in U.S. society. Educators can help address this problem by removing vending machines that sell soft drinks and snack foods from public schools. Doing so will not only improve student health and combat the soaring costs of public health care, it will also send an important message to students about making responsible choices about what they consume.

Keep Soft Drinks and Snack Foods in Public Schools

The availability of soft drinks and snack foods in schools is not the main reason for the growing problem of obesity among young people. Rather, it is the failure of students to make responsible choices for themselves. Schools should provide courses that will enable students to identify foods that contribute to a well-balanced diet and to make wise decisions about their personal health and nutrition. But neither teachers nor school administrators have the right to dictate to students what they should eat and drink.

Your purpose is to write a persuasive composition, to be read by a classroom instructor, in which you take a position on whether or not soft drinks and snack food vending machines should be banned from public schools. Be sure to defend your position with logical arguments and appropriate examples.

Prewriting

- Plan your time as a part of prewriting.
 - Segment your available time per paragraph.
- Don't spend too much time on any one part of the essay (Start with the larger essay questions, so that you answer them before you burn out or run out of time. If one essay question is worth 50% of the test score, spend 50% of your time on it. If you finish early, you can always go back and add more detail.).
- Use prewriting as a strategy for collecting your thoughts.

Understand What Readers are Looking For

DIRECTIONS FOR THE COMPOSITION SECTION OF THE WRITING SUBTEST

This section of the Writing subtest consists of one writing assignment. The assignment can be found on the next page. You are asked to prepare a multiple-paragraph composition of approximately 300 to 600 words on an assigned topic.

Your composition should effectively communicate a whole message to the specified audience for the stated purpose. You will be assessed on your ability to express, organize, and support opinions and ideas. You will not be assessed on the position you express.

On the actual VCLA writing subtest, your composition will be evaluated based on the following criteria:

- **APPROPRIATENESS:** Appropriateness is the extent to which your response addresses the topic and uses language and style appropriate to the given audience, purpose, and occasion.
- **ORGANIZATION:** Organization is the clarity of the writing and the logical sequence of your ideas.
- **FOCUS AND UNITY:** Focus and unity are the clarity with which you state and maintain focus on the main idea or point of view.
- **DEVELOPMENT:** Development is the extent to which your response provides statements of appropriate depth, specificity, and/or accuracy.
- **USAGE:** Usage is the extent to which your writing shows care and precision in word choice and is free of usage errors.
- **SENTENCE STRUCTURE:** Sentence structure is the effectiveness of the sentence structure and the extent to which the sentences are free of structural errors.
- **MECHANICAL CONVENTIONS:** Mechanical conventions are the extent to which words are spelled correctly and your response follows the conventions of punctuation and capitalization.

The final version of your composition should conform to the conventions of Standard English, should be written legibly, and should be your own original work.

Identifying and Developing a Thesis

- Avoid burying a great thesis statement in the middle of a paragraph or late in the paper.
 - Readers expect the thesis at the end of your introduction paragraph.
- Be as clear and as specific as possible; avoid vague words.
- Indicate the point of your paper but avoid sentence structures like, “The point of my paper is...”.
- The thesis should be your most interesting, complex, challenging claim of your essay.

Paragraph Structure

1. Topic Sentence (Focus on Logic Over Feeling/Belief)
 - Thesis of your paragraph
2. Evidence
 - anecdotes, examples, etc.
3. Analysis
 - Show how the evidence connects to your topic sentence.
4. Wrap-Up Sentence

Topic Sentences

- **Do** state your main idea clearly.
- **Do** balance the topic sentence between specifics and general ideas.
- **Do** hook your reader.
- **Do** keep it short and sweet.
- **Do** give a reasonable opinion.
- **Do** help guide your readers through your argument.
- **Do** make sure your wording is clear.
- **Don't** list off information.
- **Don't** mention something you don't intend to examine further.

Transitions and Sentence Fluency

- Transitions tell your reader:
 - Where you've been.
 - Where you're going.
- Variety in Sentence Beginnings
- Variety in Sentence Length and Structure

Transition Words

LOGICAL RELATIONSHIP	TRANSITIONAL EXPRESSION
Similarity	also, in the same way, just as ... so too, likewise, similarly
Exception/Contrast	but, however, in spite of, on the one hand ... on the other hand, nevertheless, nonetheless, notwithstanding, in contrast, on the contrary, still, yet
Sequence/Order	first, second, third, ... next, then, finally
Time	after, afterward, at last, before, currently, during, earlier, immediately, later, meanwhile, now, recently, simultaneously, subsequently, then
Example	for example, for instance, namely, specifically, to illustrate
Emphasis	even, indeed, in fact, of course, truly
Place/Position	above, adjacent, below, beyond, here, in front, in back, nearby, there
Cause and Effect	accordingly, consequently, hence, so, therefore, thus
Additional Support or Evidence	additionally, again, also, and, as well, besides, equally important, further, furthermore, in addition, moreover, then
Conclusion/Summary	finally, in a word, in brief, in conclusion, in the end, in the final analysis, on the whole, thus, to conclude, to summarize, in sum, in summary

Timed Test Revision Check List:

- ❑ If the essay is not very clear, then you might want to see if you can add short sentences and/or even a paragraph that elaborates and sums up what you have applied.
- ❑ Look for confusing or murky sentences, words, and ideas and eliminate them.
- ❑ Get rid of clichés, generalizations, and quotations that aren't related directly to the topic.
- ❑ Avoid repetitiveness...Check that the information you included is understandable, readable, and to the point.
- ❑ Check grammar and spelling.

Preparing for the VCLA Written Portion

- Practice makes perfect.
- Diagnose your grammar/mechanics weaknesses and check out our blog.
- Check your local libraries for style guides to use in preparation.
- Familiarize yourself with the VCLA website.
- Ask a librarian about VCLA materials on reserve.
- Talk to peers who have taken the test.
- Investigate other resources near you, such as Writing Centers.

Questions?

References

- <http://jerz.setonhill.edu/writing/academic1/timed-essays-top-5-tips-for-writing-academic-essays-under-pressure/>
- <http://writing.markfullmer.com/how-write-damn-good-timed-essays>