

CAPT Writing Across the Disciplines

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Chapter 3:

Interdisciplinary Writing Test—The Skills

The Interdisciplinary Writing Test assesses your skill level in six basic areas:

1. Taking a position
2. Comprehensiveness
3. Supporting your argument
4. Organization
5. Clarity and fluency

The rubric is geared directly toward these skills, and the people who assess your writing are focused on how well you do all these as a whole. Throughout this chapter, you can explore each of these skills in general terms through examining what they are and how you can demonstrate them. Chapter 4 focuses on how they are specifically incorporated into the CAPT Interdisciplinary Writing test.

Taking a Position

One of the skills the CAPT assesses is how well you can take a position on an issue and argue for or against it clearly and appropriately to your reader. You need to show that you can review an issue and use logical reasoning to support a side. You want to be able to convince the reader that you truly understand the issue, that your position is the correct one, and that he or she should take the action you recommend.

When you take a position and write about it, it is important that you are very clear in your wording so that there is no doubt which side you are arguing. *Above all, be sure to choose a side; waffling from one side to the other will most likely result in a failing score.* You should choose words that show you are so convinced of your viewpoint that the people who argue

the other side cannot make a stronger argument. To do this, you need to be aware of your audience so that the tone, background information, and reasoning you use are appropriate. You also need to be persuasive, using words that are convincing and arguments that make sense.

If you take a look at the rubric for the Interdisciplinary Writing, you will note that the first item at each score point level addresses how well you take a position. The figure below identifies the criteria for you.

Figure 3.1: Score Criteria for Taking a Position

Score Point	Criteria
1	May take a position and address the problem; little or no awareness of audience is shown.
2	May take a position and address the problem; little, if any, audience awareness is shown.
3	Takes a position, but the position may not be clearly developed; some awareness of audience may be shown.
4	Takes and develops a position; some awareness of audience is shown, but persuasiveness may be lacking.
5	Takes a clear and persuasive position; awareness of audience is evident.
6	Takes a clear, thoughtful, and persuasive position; keen awareness of audience is shown.

Take a couple of minutes to read over the criteria at each level. Highlight the descriptive words that seem to be the key for determining how well you score. Jot down what it is that the assessors are looking for among each level. In doing so, consider the following:

- How do the criteria for a score of 3 differ from the criteria for a score of 1 or 2?
- What is the biggest difference between the criteria for a score of 3 and the criteria for a score of 4?
- What do you need to do to raise your score from 4 to 5 or 6?

You will note that your writing is assessed at a higher score level on this aspect if it is clear and persuasive, and proves awareness of your audience.

Examples for Taking a Position

Read the following three paragraphs and try to assess where they would fall on the rubric under the “Taking a Position” skill. Each example is based on an assignment to write to the town commission about installing traffic lights at an intersection that has had an increase in

traffic. Jot down some notes as you read the paragraphs and compare your ideas to the criteria for this skill. Here are some questions to consider as you read each example:

1. To what extent does the example take a clear position? Why?
2. How persuasive is the example? Why?
3. How does the example show an awareness of the audience?
4. Which example would probably receive a 1 or 2 on the rubric? Why?
5. Which example would likely receive a 3 or 4 on the rubric? Why?
6. Which example would be the most likely to get a 5 or 6 on the rubric? Why?

Example 1

The stop signs at the corner of Burke and Main need to be removed and replaced with traffic lights because there have been too many accidents at that intersection (four in the last month). Many people fail to make a complete stop at that intersection, and others get too confused about when they have the right of way. There are also a great many pedestrians who use that intersection, and stoplights with crosswalk lights will make it safer for them. Please consider the safety of pedestrians and drivers who use that intersection and vote to have the stoplights installed.

Example 2

The intersection of Burke Street and Main Street is very crowded. Yesterday, I had to wait about five minutes to cross it with my bicycle. My friend rode across right away, but that probably was not a smart thing to do because people are not careful there. Sometimes they do not even stop at the stop signs. But sometimes it's good to not have a traffic light there because you don't have to wait for a green light when there is no other traffic. Something needs to be done to make it safer and less of a problem.

Example 3

You have to change the traffic rules at the intersection of Burke and Main because a great many people have been hurt there lately. There should be some changes made, such as removing the stop signs and putting in traffic lights. Drivers and pedestrians will be safer that way, and there will be fewer accidents.

Analysis of Examples

The examples above can be analyzed using the following chart (Figure 3.2), which examines each example for how clearly it takes a position, persuades the reader, and shows awareness of audience. Read the chart across for each aspect of this skill assessment and down for how well each example succeeds at showing the aspect. Take a few moments to study the chart and compare it to the notes you made while you were reading the examples.

Figure 3.2: Analysis of Examples

Aspect	Example	Extent of Success	Support
Takes a clear position?	1	Strong	Clearly states that traffic lights should replace the stop signs and provides reasons.
	2	Weak	Acknowledges the problem, but does not really take a position on what should be done, if anything.
	3	Medium	Takes a position, but does not provide specific information as to why the change should be made.
Is persuasive?	1	Strong	Uses persuasive words, e.g., must, safety; does not waver; focus is on the issue.
	2	Weak	Does not convince the reader to do anything in particular.
	3	Medium	Wording could be stronger (i.e., should); suggests alternative but seems uncertain (i.e., such as).
Shows awareness of audience?	1	Strong	Clearly asks the reader in a respectful tone to vote to make the specific change.
	2	Weak	Does not show that the writer knows how the reader can help; informal tone does not show as much respect for the reader as it could.
	3	Medium	Shows some knowledge about reader's role to make change, but not in a specific way.

Example 1 would probably earn the higher score because it clearly takes the position that the stop signs should be replaced with traffic lights. It uses strong, persuasive language, and asks the audience to take specific action within his/her abilities. Example 2 would probably receive the lowest score, a 1 or a 2, because it does not take a position or persuade the reader to take any specific action. While it does identify the problem, it does so in a somewhat confusing manner. The third example would fall in the middle of the rubric range. Although it takes a position, it could be clearer and more specific. It argues for the reader to take action, but the author could use stronger words for emphasis and make a specific request of the reader.

Comprehensiveness

The second skill examined through the Interdisciplinary Writing rubric is comprehensiveness. Can you read, and use, the information from all of the source material on the topic to support your position? The exam provides you with three articles to read that address the issue. The assessors will determine whether and how well you incorporate information from each of the articles to make and support your position.

To do well on this skill, you need to show that you can extract and incorporate information from the provided source material in order to formulate a clear argument supported by appropriate details. In other words, you need to be able to state your reasons for your position in your own words and be able to support those reasons with specific evidence from the provided sources. You do not need to quote or cite the sources, but, if you do quote, you *must* provide a citation. Also, it is a good idea to identify the title and/or author for specific data or details, even when you do not quote, so that the assessor has no doubt that you referenced the source. You do not need to refer to all three sources for each of the reasons you provide to support your position. However, you will show that you have developed this skill better if you use at least two of the sources for each reason.

If you take a look at the full rubric for the Interdisciplinary Writing in Chapter 1, you will note that the second item at each score point level addresses how comprehensive your writing is. The table below shows the criteria for this skill.

Figure 3.3: Score Criteria for Comprehensiveness

Score Point	Criteria
1	The response offers little or no support from the source materials, OR the support provided is copied verbatim.
2	The response contains only superficial support and/or may use information from only one or two of the source materials.
3	The response contains limited support and may not use information from each of the source materials.
4	The response contains adequate support but may not use information from each of the source materials.
5	The position is well supported, typically using information from each of the source materials.
6	The position is richly supported with information from each of the source materials.

Take a couple of minutes to read over the criteria at each level. Highlight the descriptive words that seem to be the key for determining how well you did at this skill. Jot down what it is that the assessors are looking for at each advanced level. In doing so, consider the following:

- How do the criteria for a score of 3 differ from the criteria for a score of 1 or 2?
- What is the biggest difference between the criteria for a score of 3 and the criteria for a score of 4?
- What do you need to do to raise your score from 4 to 5 or 6?

You probably noticed from the criteria that the assessors are truly looking for you to use all three sources to support your position. Incorporating information from each article will help you show that you can use your resources to make a stronger argument. Note that under the criteria for a score of 1 the assessors are looking for original wording. They do not want you to copy from the three sources word for word (which is what verbatim, used in the rubric, means). They want to see you take the information from the sources and put it together to make your own ideas about the problem. If you do not make the writing your own, and instead simply string together the words of the authors of the sources, you will not succeed on this test, even if you do use information from each source. If you gather data and examples from the three readings to develop strong reasons to support your position on the task, you will do very well.

Supporting Your Argument

The third skill the assessors look for in your writing is how well you support your argument. No matter what position you take, the assessors want to see that you can provide and support reasons for your position.

As discussed above, most of your support, in the form of details, examples, data, and quotes, will come from the three articles you are given to read. You may also use information from personal experience to give the work a sense of reality about your understanding of the problem. You will want to read the articles carefully to make sure that the evidence you use for your support does not contradict your position, and that it is relevant to what you are trying to explain. After you have added the supporting details from the source readings, you need to provide a clear explanation of how they validate your reason. This will make your argument stronger and clearer.

If you take a look at the full rubric for the Interdisciplinary Writing in Chapter 1, you will note that the third item at each score point level addresses how well you support your argument. Figure 3.4 below shows the criteria for this skill.

Chapter 7: Revising Your Writing

Chapter 2 discussed the idea that writing is a process that includes several steps to get from idea to finished product. The Interdisciplinary Writing tasks examine your skills in the early stages of that process—brainstorming, planning, and drafting. The second part of the Writing Across the Disciplines test, Editing and Revising, examines your skills in being able to polish your writing before putting it into a final, polished format.

The focus of the editing and revising stages is on improving a piece of writing. Very few people can write a nearly perfect piece on a first attempt. Often it takes several revisions to get it as close to perfect as it can be. If you have ever worked with wood, think of what you do once you have completed putting your project together. You finish it by sanding off any rough edges, polishing metal components, and maybe adding a coat or two of varnish or paint. In writing, you revise in order to refine your work by:

- reorganizing it to improve your clarity
- restructuring sentences to increase the flow
- removing any unrelated or distracting material
- revisiting your vocabulary to determine whether you have chosen appropriate and precise terms to express your ideas

You also edit your work to ensure that you have used proper English by correcting errors in mechanics, grammar, punctuation, and spelling. In this way, you sand and polish your writing so that the reader is not distracted by the rough edges left by improper use of the language.

The Editing and Revising test consists of three written passages that are generally less than one page in length. These passages contain certain errors that you must fix by choosing the correct answers to eighteen multiple-choice questions. *The Connecticut Academic*

Performance Test Second Generation Reading and Writing Across the Disciplines Handbook lists the following areas that are assessed on this test:

- Composition (Revising)
 - Content, Organization, and Tone
 - Sentence Construction
 - Word Choice

- Editing
 - Capitalization
 - Punctuation
 - Usage
 - Spelling

This chapter will give you an overview of revising your writing. You will learn more about editing in Chapter 8. Remember, the information provided is intended to refresh your memory; it is not intended to be a sole source for your education on these skills. If you need additional help with any of the topics discussed below, please ask one of your teachers or your parents for specific help. There are also a variety of books that focus on composition and revision, some of which are noted in the Appendix.

Composition

Composition, according to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, is:

1 a: the act or process of composing; *specifically*: arrangement into specific proportion or relation and especially into artistic form.

Applying this definition to the writing process, composition is the process of arranging words into an artistic form. It takes skill to do this, and just as a person develops skills in piano playing or football, you need to practice the basics of writing in order to begin mastering the skills. After putting ideas down in an initial draft, writers generally work on improving the composition aspect of writing. That is, the writer refines and polishes it to get the rough edges off. In this way, the reader can focus on the overall meaning, rather than on specific word choices, sentence structure, or grammatical issues.

Content, Organization, and Tone

One area of composition that the CAPT Writing Across the Disciplines assesses is how well you can improve content (the topic, subtopic, and details you put into a piece of writing), organization (as discussed in detail in Chapters 3 and 5), and tone (choosing words and phrases that are appropriate to your purpose and audience). The Editing and Revising test specifically addresses several aspects of this area.

Topic Sentence

The topic sentence is the main idea of a paragraph. You may have been taught in the past that it is usually the first sentence, but that is not always the case. A topic sentence may actually appear in any part of a paragraph. However, there are certain things you can do to find the topic sentence of a paragraph:

- Look for the general statement. The most general statement will probably be the topic sentence. Its job is to make sure you have a basic idea of what the paragraph is discussing and it will probably not be as specific as some of the other sentences.
- Look for the most definitive statement. The statement that makes a point or establishes a point the writer wants to show as fact is the stronger sentence, and will very likely be the sentence that all the others explain and support.
- Separate out the sentences that contain the details. The topic sentence will most likely not contain specific details. It is generally the job of the other sentences to bolster the topic sentence. The details support it. If you think of a paragraph as a pyramid, the topic sentence will be at the top, and all the other sentences will be on the lower levels, supporting the main idea.
- Look for the statement that every other statement in the paragraph relates back to. In one way or another, each of the other sentences in a paragraph should refer back to the topic sentence. The supporting statements may not relate directly to each other, but they will all relate to the main idea.

Let's take a look at a couple of sample paragraphs. Try to pinpoint the topic sentence after you read each example.

Example 1

If you are a new student at our school, you are very lucky. The people at our school are extremely friendly. Many of them will offer to help you if you are lost, invite you to join a club or sport, or tell you which teachers to avoid. The other day, I saw two juniors walking with a freshman to class, giving him suggestions for which stairways to use to get to certain classes more quickly. Not everyone is so outgoing or helpful, but the majority of us are willing to do what we can to make the transition easier for the newcomer.

Example 2

I broke my finger playing basketball last summer. My friend broke her ankle playing miniature golf. A tennis ball hit another friend of mine on the head, and he got a concussion from it. Many sports can be dangerous when we do not pay close attention to what we and other participants are doing.

In the first example, the second sentence (“The people at our school are extremely friendly.”) is the topic sentence. It is the most definitive, and the most general statement,

with no specific details or examples. Also, each of the other sentences tells us about specific actions students have taken to be helpful or outgoing toward one another. Finally, each of the other sentences can be directly connected to that one statement.

The second example is a bit different. The first three sentences give examples of specific injuries received while playing sports. They do not directly relate to one another, but they do all support the final sentence. The final statement also makes a definitive proclamation: sports can be dangerous. Based on this analysis, the last sentence is the topic sentence.

Supporting Details

To find sentences that serve as supporting details to the topic sentence, you can

- look for the sentences with details or examples.
- look for the sentences that do not necessarily declare something as final or true. The details may be suggestive, but they are not as strong as the topic sentence.
- look for the sentences that support the topic sentence. These are the ones that are not required for the pyramid to hold up the main idea. If you pull out one or another of the sentences with supporting detail, the other sentences could rearrange themselves in the pyramid to continue supporting the main idea.
- look for the sentences that are directly related to the topic sentence. The supporting sentences may not necessarily directly relate to one another, but they will each refer to the topic sentence.

Go back to the examples above and note the supporting details. They are all in the sentences that back up the main idea, or further explain it. They may not all be directly related to each other, but they all help to give support to the topic sentence.

Extraneous (or Unnecessary) Material

Paragraphs with extraneous material are confusing and serve only to distract the reader. Information that is not relevant to the main idea of the writing in general or the paragraph in particular decreases the effectiveness of your writing. Sometimes it is hard to get rid of the extraneous information because you wrote it so well or it contains an interesting fact. However, your main idea is the focus, and no matter how wonderful the wording you created or amazing the fact, you need to get rid of it if it does not help explain your topic.

For example, it would not help to tell about a friendly person you met at the mall in Example 1. Your main idea is friendly people at school, not the mall. Similarly, it would be confusing to put the rules for basketball in Example 2 because it just would not make sense if you are explaining your theory that games can be dangerous.

Using the following examples, try to identify the information that is extraneous, or irrelevant to the rest of the paragraph.

Example 3

I found a starfish on my vacation. It was on the beach, probably washed in by the tide. It is in very good shape, with no holes or broken pieces. I went to the ice cream

shop after I found the starfish. I might decide to give the starfish to my grandmother, who collects them, but it's so pretty I might just keep it on my desk.

Example 4

The stars were very bright last night. I could see many constellations, such as the big and little dippers, from my backyard. I guess there were no clouds to hide them from me. I heard an owl too, which was really cool. I like studying the constellations and examining the skies. Someday, I'd like to travel in space to see them from a new perspective.

In Example 3, the sentence about having ice cream does not really fit with the rest of the paragraph. While it refers to the starfish, it does not tell us anything about the starfish or the author's reflection about finding the starfish. In Example 4, the paragraph is about watching the skies, and while the author may have heard an owl at the same time she saw the stars, that information does not fit.

Chronological and Logical Order

Your paragraphs and your writing as a whole need to be in an order that makes sense. Order may be based on chronology, topic, or importance. It can also be based on size (e.g., mouse, cat, horse, moose) or distance (New York City, Alaska, Japan). In fact, you can order your writing in any way that is logical in terms of the topic you have chosen.

An examination of a couple of lists of topics and subtopics will help you understand the idea of order. Try to establish how you might order them, whether within a paragraph or a whole piece of writing:

Example 5

- World War II
- Gulf War
- Vietnam War
- World War I

In this example, the writer is considering something about different wars. One way to organize it logically would be to put the paragraphs in chronological order. To do this, you would start with the earliest war, World War I. The sequence would continue with World War II, Vietnam, and the Gulf War.

Example 6

- Streets
- Highways
- Sidewalks
- Paths
