Writing the ACT Essay

There are three major areas of an ACT response that gain students points: the quality of ideas, the structure of the essay, and the correctness of the writing. Each of these areas needs to be in place in a good ACT response for the essay to receive a high score.

Structure

One of the most important parts of the ACT is the structure of the essay itself. Although the instructions ask you to write a letter, your writing should follow the structure of a five-paragraph essay with an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion. In addition, in order to maximize your likelihood of passing the test, you should pre-write much of your essay. The introduction for every essay can be written in advance with blanks. The topic sentences and concluding sentences for each paragraph can be written in much the same manner. Most importantly, even before writing sample tests, you should have a good sense of what jobs the various sentences in the essay should do. You have topic sentences, explanation sentences, detail sentences, and so forth. By understanding the jobs of the sentences in advance, you will never have to worry about what the next sentence should say.

However, before you can effectively understand the structure of an ACT response, you must understand the structure of an ACT question. Fortunately, all ACT questions follow the same basic format. Below is an example question with the key parts highlighted.

Your community has received a large grant from the federal government to assist men and women in getting jobs. Two proposals for using the money have been made. One proposal is to teach computer skills to members of the community who are looking for a job. The other proposal is to provide daycare for parents with young children. There is enough money to fund only one of these proposals, so a decision must be made. The city council will base its decision on which of the proposals will benefit the community as a whole. Write a letter to your city council in which you argue for teaching computer skills or for providing daycare, explaining how your choice will benefit the community.

Each of the underlined sections of the question is important for producing an effective response and will fit into some part of the response structure. The first part, the plan (to assist men and women in getting jobs) is usually found in the first or second sentence of the question and is used in your introduction to help orient your essay to the question being asked. The next two highlighted sections (to teach computer skills to members of the community who are looking for a job and to provide daycare for parents with young children) are the two proposals that you need to decide between. In the essay, you will argue for only one of these proposals. The fourth and final highlighted section of the question is the goal (benefit the community). The goal is usually found at the end of the question and usually follows the phrase “explaining how your choice will.” You must keep the goal in mind when writing the entire essay because your reasons must be related to the goal. If you have a general goal, like “benefit the community,” then you can have almost any reason because all positive reasons will benefit the community. However, if you have a specific goal, like “reduce class size,” then you can only use reasons that lead to a reduced class size. Therefore, on the day of the exam, you should seriously consider choosing the question with the more general goal (e.g. “benefit the community” or “improve the quality of life of students”).
With the above discussion of the ACT question format in mind, look at the following sample structure that can be used on an ACT. The essay is divided into five basic paragraphs: an introduction, a counter-argument, two reasons, and a conclusion. Words written in straight (non-italicized) letters can be copied into your essay directly, and italicized letters indicate that you need to insert information from the question or from your own thoughts and reasons. On the last page of this handout, I have provided a model essay that follows the following format. If you are confused about how to follow the structure, refer to the model.

**Introduction**

Yesterday, I heard about the college’s/community’s plan to [insert the plan]. Two proposals have been made. One proposal is to [insert the first proposal], and the other proposal is to [insert the second proposal]. Both proposals are exciting; however, the proposal to [insert the proposal that you support] is better because it will [insert the goal].

**Body I**

The proposal to [insert the proposal that you do not support] sounds like a good idea, but it will not [insert the goal].

- Give your first reason against the proposal that you did not choose
- Give one or, preferably, two sentences explaining this reason
- Also, give your first reason against the proposal that you did not choose
- Give one or, preferably, two sentences explaining this reason

Therefore, the college/community should not enact this proposal.

**Body II**

On the other hand, [insert the proposal that you support] will [insert the goal] because it will [insert your first reason].

- In two to three sentences, explain the reason that you stated.
- In two to three sentences, give specific examples and details of your explanation.

**OR**

- Provide a specific example of an individual who, in another community or college, benefited from the proposal that you chose for the reason that you presented at the beginning of this paragraph.

Thus, the college/community would be best served by [insert the proposal that you support].

**Body III**

Moreover, this proposal will be good for the college/community because it will [insert your second reason].

- In two to three sentences, explain the reason that you stated.
- In two to three sentences, give specific examples and details of your explanation.

**OR**

- Provide a specific example of an individual who, in another community or college, benefited from the proposal that you chose for the reason that you presented at the beginning of this paragraph.

For this reason, the college/community would be wise to follow this proposal.
Conclusion

The college's/community's plan to __[insert plan]__ is important. However, only the proposal to __[insert the proposal that you support]__ will have the effect that the community/college desires. If the college/community is serious about its goal to __[insert the goal]__, then it should seriously consider enacting this proposal.

Quality of Ideas

Many students report having difficulty generating solid ideas at the beginning of the test. Students often indicate that they were able to get one idea, but they spent too much time coming up with a second one. This kind of problem can be disastrous because the ACT is a timed test and time lost to brainstorming could be spent on the writing or editing your essay. The best way to avoid idea generation problems is to brainstorm in advance. Although you do not know your test question in advance, many reasons work for a large number of prompts, and if you practice adapting reasons to prompts, you will find that using pre-planed reasons is actually quite simple. Here is a list of reasons against and for almost any proposal. These reasons will work most times, but you should feel free to add your own ideas to the lists. You should always use any reasons that are unique to the proposal first, and then you should move on to reasons from the lists.

Against
- Too expensive to maintain
- No qualified personnel available
- Students’ grades will go down
- Will create safety concerns
- We already have enough of what this proposal will create (last resort)
- This proposal was tried somewhere else, and it failed (Super Last Resort)

For
- Will improve safety
- Helps a commonly discriminated group
- Will improve students grades
- Will help students/residents to socialize fun
- Will reduce stress
- Will improve health
- Will make something more convenient
- Will create jobs
- Will help residents to get jobs

It is vitally important to remember that on the ACT you are in total control of the community that you are writing about. This means that you get a chance to create the problem that your community/college is suffering from. For example, if you choose to support a proposal providing more elevators and escalators for your college, then you can argue that your college currently lacks a sufficient number of elevators. You can further argue that your college has many floors and that students are often late to class because of the long climb. Whether or not these facts are true is irrelevant. You, as the creator of the world that you are writing about can make them true. Not having to stick closely to the facts of the college or community you are writing about is a great help on the ACT.
Model Essay

Yesterday, I heard about the community’s plan to assist men and women in getting jobs. Two proposals have been made. One proposal is to teach computer skills to members of the community who are looking for a job, and the other proposal is to provide daycare for parents with young children. Both proposals are exciting; however, the proposal to teach computer skills is better because it will benefit the community.

The proposal to provide daycare sounds like a good idea, but it will not benefit the community. First, there are no qualified daycare workers in the community to work at the new center. If the community were to enact this proposal, then the children in the community would not be well taken care of. Unqualified personal will not know what to do in the case of an emergency and will not be able to provide the community’s children with educational experiences or proper nutrition. Second, this proposal will only help very few people. My community has very few young children. Most of these children are from two parent homes and do not need daycare. Therefore, the community should not enact this proposal.

On the other hand, the proposal to create computer training classes will benefit the community because it will help residents to get jobs. Many jobs in this day and age require computer skills. Many of our residents have been thrown out of work or have been refused jobs because they do not possess the necessary skills to compete. Computer training classes will teach community members valuable skills like how to use programs such as Microsoft Office and how to conduct internet research. This knowledge will allow residents to compete for jobs as researchers, personal assistants, and clerks. Moreover, large local companies that have been forced to hire out of town workers will be able to hire local workers if our residents had more computer training. Thus, the community would be best served by the proposal to create computer training classes.

Moreover, the proposal will be good for the community because it will make job training more convenient. Currently any residents who want to get quality job training need to travel three towns away to take a good class. For this reason, good job training is expensive and highly inconvenient. Many residents do not have cars and rely on long, expensive bus rides to get to job training in distant towns. The few residents who are able to get this distant training are greatly inconvenienced. For example, friends of mine take an evening express bus that costs five dollars each way. This bus takes 90 minutes each way and my friends have to wait for over an hour after their job training class to take the bus home. My friends, like many residents, are greatly inconvenienced by the distance of current job training sites. For this reason, the community would be wise to follow this proposal.

The community’s plan to assist men and women in getting jobs is important. However, only the proposal to teach computer skills will have the effect that the community desires. If the community is serious about its goal to benefit its citizens, then it should seriously consider enacting this proposal.

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