

ACT PREP: (Optional) Essay

From: ACT Writing Test, <http://www.act.org>
PrepScholar, <http://blog.prepscholar.com>

Essay: The essay will require the student to respond to one (1) prompt that will describe an issue and three (3) different perspectives on that issue in **40 minutes**. **“The prompt now asks students to consider how changes in the world today affect all humanity, forcing the students to place the issue in a broader context”** (*PrepScholar*). “You are asked to **evaluate and analyze** the given perspectives, **state and develop** your own perspective, and **explain the relationship** between your perspective and those given. You may adopt a perspective from the prompt, partially or fully, or you may generate your own. Your score will not be affected by the point of view you take on the issue” (*Act Writing Test*).

“Taking the writing test does not affect your subject area scores or your Composite score. However, without a writing test score, no English Language Arts (ELA) score will be reported.”

Your essay will be evaluated based on the evidence that it provides of your ability to:

- **Analyze and evaluate** multiple perspectives on a complex issue.
- **State and develop** your own perspective on the issue.
- **Explain and support your ideas** with logical reasoning and detailed examples.
- **Clearly and logically organize** your ideas in an essay.
- **Effectively communicate** your ideas in standard written English.

Writing Domains: Your essay will be scored on a scale of 1-6 on each of the following domains for a total score of 6-36.

- **Ideas and Analysis**—Scores in this domain reflect the ability to generate productive ideas and engage critically with multiple perspectives on the given issue. Competent writers understand the issue they are invited to address, the purpose for writing, and the audience. They generate ideas that are relevant to the situation.

1. **Choose** a perspective on this issue and state it clearly.

Machines will never be able to replace humans entirely, as creativity is not something that can be mechanized. Because machines can perform delicate and repetitive tasks with precision, however, they are able to take over for humans with regards to low-skill, repetitive jobs and high-skill, extremely precise jobs. This then frees up humans to do what we do best - think, create, and move the world forward.

2. **Evaluate** how true (or untrue) each (of the three given) perspectives is.

In the future, machines might lead us to lose our humanity; alternatively, machines might lead us to unimaginable pinnacles of achievement. I would argue, however, projecting possible futures does not make them true, and that the evidence we have at present supports the perspective that machines are, above all else, efficient and effective completing repetitive and precise tasks.

3. **Analyze** the implications of each perspective.

- Who might hold this perspective?
- Why would they hold it?
- What if we all held this perspective?
- What is one weakness or strength of this perspective?

4. **Compare** the remaining two perspectives to the perspective you have chosen.

Machines will never be able to replace humans entirely, as creativity is not something that can be mechanized, which means that our humanity is safe. Because machines can perform delicate and repetitive tasks with precision, however, they are able to take over for humans with regards to low-skill, repetitive jobs and high-skill, extremely precise jobs. Rather than forcing us to challenge our ideas about what humans are or could be, machines simply allow us to BE, without distractions. This then frees up humans to do what we do best - think, create, and move the world forward.

- **Development and Support**—Scores in this domain reflect the ability to discuss ideas, offer rationale, and bolster an argument. Competent writers explain and explore their ideas, discuss implications, and illustrate through examples. They help the reader understand their thinking about the issue.

Machines are good at low-skill, repetitive jobs and at high-speed, extremely precise jobs. In both cases, they work better than humans. Take, for instance, the example of printing. As a composer, I need to be able to create many copies of my sheet music to give to my musicians. If I were to copy out each part by hand, it would take days, and would most likely contain inaccuracies. On the other hand, my printer (a machine) is able to print out multiple copies of parts with extreme precision. If it turns out I made an error when I was entering in the sheet music onto the computer (another machine), I can easily correct this error and print out more copies quickly.

- **Organization**—Scores in this domain reflect the ability to organize ideas with clarity and purpose. Organizational choices are integral to effective writing. Competent writers arrange their essay in a way that clearly shows the relationship between ideas, and they guide the reader through their discussion.

Paragraph 1: Introduction (with your stated point of view)

Paragraph 2: Machines help us because [evidence] (discussion of perspective 2)

Paragraph 3: Some argue that machines are hurting us, but here's my contrary evidence (comparison of perspective 1 and perspective 2)

Paragraph 4: While I do believe that machines are advantageous, this advantage lies in what they can do for us, not what they reveal about us (comparison of perspective 3 and perspective 2)

Paragraph 5: Conclusion

Here are my **Top 5 ACT Writing Organization Rules** to follow (from *PrepScholar*):

1. Be sure to **include an introduction** (with your thesis stating your point of view), **paragraphs in which you make your case**, and a **conclusion** that sums up your argument
 2. When planning your essay, make sure to **present your ideas in an order that makes sense** (and follows a logical progression that will be easy for the grader to follow).
 3. Make sure that you **unify your essay with one main idea**. Do not switch arguments partway through your essay.
 4. **Don't write everything in one huge paragraph**. If you're worried you're going to run out of space to write, you can try using a paragraph symbol, ¶, at the beginning of each paragraph as a last resort (if you can't write smaller).
 5. **Use transitions between paragraphs** (usually the last line of the previous paragraph and the first line of the paragraph) to "strengthen relationships among ideas" ([Act.org](#)). This means going above and beyond "First of all...Second...Lastly" at the beginning of each paragraph. Instead, use the transitions between paragraphs as an opportunity to describe how that paragraph relates to your main argument.
- **Language Use and Conventions**—Scores in this domain reflect the ability to use written language to convey arguments with clarity. Competent writers make use of the conventions of grammar, syntax, word usage, and mechanics. They are also aware of their audience and adjust the style and tone of their writing to communicate effectively.
 - There are **three** main parts of this domain:
 1. **Grammar, Usage, and Mechanics**

Poor (Score of 3): *Machines are good at doing there jobs quickly and precisely. Also because machines aren't human or self-aware they don't get bored so they can do the same thing over & over again without getting worse.*

Better (Score of 6): *Machines excel at performing their jobs both quickly and precisely. In addition, since machines are not self-aware they are unable to get "bored." This means that they can perform the same task over and over without a decrease in quality.*

2. Sentence Structure

Poor (Score of 3): *Machines are more efficient than humans at many tasks. Machines are not causing us to lose our humanity. Instead, machines help us to be human by making things more efficient so that we can, for example, feed the needy with technological advances.*

Better (Score of 6): *Machines are more efficient than humans at many tasks, but that does not mean that machines are causing us to lose our humanity. In fact, machines may even assist us in maintaining our humanity by providing more effective and efficient ways to feed the needy.*

3. Vocabulary and Word Choice

Poor (Score of 3): *Machines are good at doing their jobs quickly and precisely.*

Poor (Score of 3): *Machines excel at performing their jobs both quickly and precisely.*

Better (Score of 6): *Machines are often instrumental in ramifying safety features.*

Writing Template

Stage 1: Planning (8-10 minutes)

Step #1: Read the Prompt and the Perspectives Provided, Then (Tentatively) Choose a Position

- **Good News:** Three defensible perspectives will be provided.
- **Suggestion:** Though instructions indicate you can create a fourth perspective, this is a time-waster unless you already have a strong opinion, complete with evidence.

Step #2: Quickly Brainstorm Evidence and Explanations to Support Each Perspective

- Because you must provide evidence for each of the three perspectives, you might consider the following sources for that evidence:
 - **Opening paragraph of the prompt:** If you haven't already, read through the paragraph at the beginning of the essay prompt. You can appropriate some or all of the examples in it to use in your own essay.
 - **Personal Experience:** You can tell any story (real or not) about you or someone else you know (or make up) that supports any one of your points.
 - **Statistics:** Again, these can be real or made up.
 - **Specifics from Sources:** Use knowledge of events from history or current events to support your points. For this essay, you could use the invention of the printing press (and its effects) as an example of how mechanization can lead to "unimagined possibilities."

Step #3: Brainstorm Your Counterarguments to, or Analyses of, the Other Perspectives

Example (*PrepScholar*)

Perspective One: What we lose with the replacement of people by machines is some part of our own humanity. Even our mundane daily encounters no longer require from us basic courtesy, respect, and tolerance for other people.

Evidence: Many of our phone conversations are conducted not with people, but with sophisticated technologies...that don't necessarily work at 100%

Explanation: People get so frustrated with the technology that when they press "0" to speak with a real human they are often rude and discourteous

Counterargument/analysis: The benefits outweigh the costs, because providing people with the option to submit prescriptions or ask about store hours through an automated menu frees up customer service reps to answer real questions. In addition, recordings of calls with angry customers are used to improve the menus.

Perspective Two: Machines are good at low-skill, repetitive jobs, and at high-speed, extremely precise jobs. In both cases they work better than humans. This efficiency leads to a more prosperous and progressive world for everyone.

Evidence: Robots build cars on assembly lines

Explanation: Lower cost, decreases risk of injury to human workers

Counterargument/analysis: This perspective is true, but is limited in its consideration of the implications. Robots can not only do things instead of humans, but can actually work with humans, as in precise surgery, to a better result than either humans or machines alone.

Perspective Three: Intelligent machines challenge our long-standing ideas about what humans are or can be. This is good because it pushes both humans and machines toward new, unimagined possibilities.

Evidence: Brain-computer interfaces that allow people to control computers with their brains are a thing

Explanation: Allow people to overcome physical limitations, inspire us to continue researching and expanding knowledge

Step #4: Organize Your Essay

Introduction

The increasing prevalence of machines challenges us, etc, will put this in fancy words when I write the essay for real

Body Paragraph 1

- Perspective One argues that replacing humans with machine leads us to lose part of our own humanity, because even our mundane daily encounters no longer require from us basic courtesy, respect, and tolerance for other people.
- I have witnessed this in my own life through watching my mother interact with some of those "sophisticated" automated phone systems. She sometimes gets so frustrated with the technology refusing to do what she wants that, by the time the menu allows her to speak to a real human, my mother is no longer courteous or respectful.
- Despite this frustration, I think the benefits outweigh the costs, because providing people with the option to submit prescriptions or ask about store hours through an automated menu frees up customer service reps to answer real questions. In addition, recordings of calls with angry customers are used to improve the menus.

Body Paragraph 2

- In contrast to Perspective One, Perspective Two argues that the main utility of machines is in their ability to perform repetitive tasks more precisely and efficiently than humans.
- In auto plants around the world, robots build cars on assembly lines, performing their jobs with high precision and at lower overall cost to employers, who can make a one time purchase rather than having to pay a human a yearly salary (and worry about liability issues)
- This perspective is fine as far as it goes, but is limited in its consideration of the implications. Robots can not only do things instead of humans, but can actually work with humans, as in precise surgery, to a better result than either humans or machines alone.

Body Paragraph 3

- The true impact of intelligent machines in our lives is that they challenge us to re-think our preconceived notions of what people can do or become in the future.
- An example of this is brain-computer interfaces that allow people to control computers with their brains.
- With BCIs, people can overcome physical limitations.. In addition, BCIs have capture the interest of people from all different backgrounds and are being applied to non-scientific fields to create new, previously unimagined inventions and ways to interact with the world.

Conclusion sentence

In conclusion, rather than taking away from our humanity, intelligent machines help us to move forward as a species to new heights.

Stage 2: Writing (25-28 minutes)

Step #5: Introduction Paragraph & Thesis

- ***(If writing the introduction stumps you, just leave 10-15 lines blank at the beginning of the paper and come back to it.)***
- **Context statement** (interesting, puts the prompt in perspective)

From the simplest system of pulleys and ropes in ancient Greece to the most complex supercomputer in the world today, machines have had (and continue to have) a profound influence on the development of humanity.

- **State your thesis.** This should include your perspective on the issue and how it relates to the other perspectives presented in the prompt.

While some argue that machines have a negative impact on us, the increasing prevalence of intelligent machines in the world challenges us to change long held beliefs about our limitations and to continue forward to new and even more advanced possibilities.

Step #6: Body Paragraphs

- When you start your first body paragraph, try to think of a first sentence that refers back to the first paragraph. Ideally, you'll start every paragraph this way, to create a unified argument.

One common argument against the increased presence of machines in our day-to-day lives (seen in Perspective One) is that machines leach away at our basic humanity.

- Then address the argument opposing yours (in this case, Perspective One). Explain the evidence that supports this perspective in 3-5 sentences.

I found this to be true in my own life as a result of witnessing many a phone conversation between my mother and an automated telephone menu. For whatever reason, she consistently has issues with the menus that try to verify her date of birth. The automated system never understands what she says (possibly because of her accent), and asks her to input the numbers via her keypad; of course, my mom's smartphone is so smart that the screen turns off while she is on a call, making it impossible for her to follow the automated phone system's instructions. By the time the system gives up and routes her to speak to a "human representative," my mother is often so frustrated that she is far from courteous and respectful to that person.

- Then, make sure to explain your counterargument to this perspective, tying it back to your thesis.

Despite my mother's understandable frustration with automated phone systems, however, overall the benefits outweigh the costs. Providing people with the option to submit prescriptions or ask about store hours through an automated menu frees up customer service representatives to answer questions machines are incapable of addressing. In addition, the recordings of angry phone calls (where customers are not courteous, respectful, or tolerant of other humans) are used to improve the phone menus to make them more user-friendly. Thus, the momentary disrespect toward other humans caused by machines is more than compensated for by the positive effects of those same machines.

- In Body Paragraph 2, introduce your thoughts on the second perspective.
- Address the argument of this second perspective (in this case, Perspective Two). Explain the evidence that supports this perspective in 3-5 sentences.
- Then, make sure to explain how this perspective relates back to your perspective.
- In Body Paragraph 3, introduce your main perspective, linking it back to the counterarguments you've made against the other two perspectives.
- Present one final example in support of your perspective.

Step #7: Conclusion: Check your time. Try to have 5-6 minutes left at this point. Come up with a quick sentence that restates your thesis to wrap up the essay.

In conclusion, rather than taking away from our humanity, intelligent machines actually help us to move forward as a species to achieve new, previously unimagined possibilities.

Stage 3: Revising (2-4 minutes)

Step #8: Reread & Revise

Scoring

Two trained readers will score your essay on a scale of 1-6 in each of the four writing domains (Ideas and Analysis, Development and Support, Organization, and Language Use and Conventions). Each domain score represents the sum of the two readers' scores. If the readers' ratings disagree by more than one point, a third reader will evaluate the essay and resolve the discrepancy. Your writing score is calculated from your domain scores and is reported on a scale of 1-36. Your domain scores do not necessarily add up to your reported writing score.

Karen H. Reeves
Edmund Burke Academy