



CUNY Assessment Test in Writing (CATW)

Practice Exercises for Students

Office of Assessment
Office of Academic Affairs
The City University of New York

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Practice Exercises for Students

How to Understand the Reading and Get Started

Before you start to write your response, we recommend you spend 20 minutes reading and underlining significant ideas and 10 minutes planning and prewriting. The more time you spend understanding the reading and getting ideas before you write, the easier it will be to write.

1. Below is a practice reading, “How to Do One Thing at a Time.” Read it and underline significant ideas. Make notes of how you plan to organize your response.

How to Do One Thing at a Time

By now, we all know that multi-tasking can be a losing proposition. Talking on the phone while driving? Dumb idea. Texting while driving? *Really* dumb idea. But even seemingly harmless multi-tasking—like chatting with a friend while sending out an office e-mail—isn’t as harmless or efficient as we’d like to believe. A recent article published in the science journal *NeuroImage* revealed that when we attempt demanding tasks simultaneously, we end up doing neither as well as we should because our brains have cognitive limits.

What’s more, we’re also less efficient *after* we’ve shut down e-mail and turned off our phones. In a recent experiment at Stanford University, a group of students was asked to spend 30 minutes simultaneously compiling a music playlist, chatting, and writing a short essay. A second group focused on each task individually for 10 minutes each. Afterward, they were given a memory test. The single-taskers did significantly better than their multi-tasking peers.

“A tremendous amount of evidence shows that the brain does better when it’s performing tasks in sequence rather than all at once,” says Clifford Nass, Ph.D., a professor of communication at Stanford University. “We still don’t know the long-term effects of chronic multi-tasking, but there’s no question we’re bad at it, and it’s bad for us.”

Many experts believe, however, that it’s possible to repair your power of concentration. Through solutions such as yoga and acupuncture, experts believe we can break our multi-tasking habit and sharpen our focus.

Adapted from Women’s Health Magazine, May 2010

2. Below is an example of how a student annotated the reading and planned a response. Compare your annotations with the example. Did you underline the same sentences? Notice how this student made a T-chart to organize the ideas.

How to Do One Thing at a Time

By now, we all know that multi-tasking can be a losing proposition. Talking on the phone while driving? Dumb idea. Texting while driving? *Really* dumb idea. But even seemingly harmless multi-tasking—like chatting with a friend while sending out an office e-mail—isn't as harmless or efficient as we'd like to believe. A recent article published in the science journal *NeuroImage* ^{nerves} revealed that when we attempt demanding tasks simultaneously, we end up doing neither as well as we should because our brains have cognitive limits.

a) can't do 2 things
b) brain limited

What's more, we're also less efficient after we've shut down e-mail and turned off our phones. In a recent experiment at Stanford University, a group of students was asked to spend 30 minutes simultaneously compiling a music playlist, ^{on line} chatting, and writing a short essay. A second group focused on each task individually for 10 minutes each. Afterward, they were given a memory test. The single-taskers did significantly better than their multi-tasking peers. ^{what kind of test?}

"A tremendous amount of evidence shows that the brain does better when it's performing tasks in sequence rather than all at once," says Clifford Nass, Ph.D., a professor of communication at Stanford University. "We still don't know the long-term effects of chronic multi-tasking, but there's no question we're bad at it, and it's bad for us." ^{habitual} is this true?

Many experts believe, however, that it's possible to repair your power of concentration. Through solutions such as yoga and acupuncture, experts believe we can break our multi-tasking habit and sharpen our focus.

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Notes	Text/Sum	Development
1)	2 things at once Brain limits	open door, hold coffee cup worry about memory loss
2)	less effective	permanent damage?
3)	concentrate	brother - reads a lot - what kind of memory test?
4)	sequence	like climbing a mountain
5)	solutions	exercise - clears mind

How to Develop Your Response

In the Writing Directions for the CATW assignment, you are asked to “develop your essay by identifying one idea” and explaining its significance. You are also told to support your ideas with evidence or examples from “what you have read, learned in school, and/or personally experienced.” Below is a portion of a response to the passage, “How to Do One Thing at a Time.”

1. Read the partial response below and identify the idea the writer has chosen to focus on. How does the writer develop the idea? Does the writer use examples and details from his/her reading, previous school learning, or personal experience? Notice also what the writer does in the first paragraph.

Sample Response

The article says we're less efficient even after we stop emailing and get off the phone. This conclusion was based on an experiment where students were asked to do three things at once for 30 minutes—create a playlist of music, chat on email, and write an essay. A second group was asked to do the same three things but one at a time, for ten minutes each. At the end, students in the second group performed better on a memory test than those who tried to multitask.

I am not surprised the second group performed better. I can imagine chatting on email at the same time I'm fooling around with an iPod, but I certainly couldn't write an essay as well. Writing an essay takes (me) a lot of time and concentration. I once had a teacher who made us practice writing 10-minute essays so we would be ready for a timed test. We did it every class for a couple of weeks before the test, and it was effective for training the class to concentrate and write fast enough to do a 50 minute test. He called it “special case” writing, something to do for a timed test to get ideas down quickly. He never said it was the way to really write. Writing an essay involves reading, thinking, and revising, not while doing other things. That's why we have libraries and quiet study areas. I envy the person who can write an essay while doing other things—but only if the person gets an A on the essay. Otherwise, I'll stick to my slow, single-minded approach.

Students who think they can multitask are in for a big surprise when they get to difficult subjects and demanding assignments. This carries beyond school to many activities in life, driving, parenting, getting promoted for doing a job well....

[**Note:** This response is not finished. It needs further development and an ending.]

2. Below is the sample response showing its development. Refer to the code below.

Development of “Sample Response”

¹The article says we're less efficient even after we stop emailing and get off the phone. This conclusion was based on an experiment where students were asked to do three things at once for 30 minutes—create a playlist of music, chat on email, and write an essay. A second group was asked to do the same three things but one at a time, for ten minutes each. At the end, students in the second group performed better on a memory test than those who tried to multitask.

²I am not surprised the second group performed better. ³I can imagine chatting on email at the same time I'm fooling around with an iPod, but I certainly couldn't write an essay as well. Writing an essay takes (me) a lot of time and concentration. ⁴I once had a teacher who made us practice writing 10-minute essays so we would be ready for a timed test. We did it every class for a couple of weeks before the test, and it was effective for training the class to concentrate and write fast enough to do a 50 minute test. He called it “special case” writing, something to do for a timed test to get ideas down quickly. He never said it was the way to really write. Writing an essay involves reading, thinking, and revising, not while doing other things. That's why we have libraries and quiet study areas. ⁵I envy the person who can write an essay while doing other things—but only if the person gets an A on the essay. Otherwise, I'll stick to my slow, single-minded approach.

⁶Students who think they can multitask are in for a big surprise when they get to difficult subjects and demanding assignments. This carries beyond school to many activities in life, driving, parenting, getting promoted for doing a job well....

Code:

¹Summary of passage

²Personal response overall to summary

³One idea writer wants to develop

⁴Personal experience that develops idea

⁵Conclusion/lesson of personal experience

⁶Continuing development

How to Demonstrate Connections Between Ideas

In the CATW analytic scoring rubric, the category “Structure of the Response” looks at how well you organize your response and “demonstrate connections between ideas.” In other words, it is important that your sentences and paragraph connect one to the next, so the reader can follow your thinking. You don’t want the reader to fall into a hole between sentences or paragraphs.

As an example, here are two sets of sentences: A and B. In which set are the two connected? Explain your answer.

- A. ¹It is safe to say that advertisements are a person’s guideline in life. ²After the Industrial Revolution almost everyone wants to transfigure into a modernized individual.
- B. ¹Although it may be irritating to see an ad come on in the middle of your favorite show, the information supplied by that ad may not be available to you anywhere else. ²Corporations create ads to keep us updated on what is new.

Answer: The sentences in B are connected. The second sentence provides a specific detail/example as a restatement of the first. It “opens up” the first sentence. In contrast, the sentences in A seem unconnected. You cannot be sure of the connection, and the meaning is not clear.

Further Examples

1. Look at the Sample Student Paper #1, paragraphs 5 and 6 below. (The complete response is on pp. 11-12) Notice how the writer connects each sentence and paragraph to the next one.

I suppose I’ve written all of this to show, as the author points out, how advertising permeates our entire society. There’s a chemical term which I think would apply to this, the Point of Saturation. Basically, when you have mixed so much solute (e.g. sugar) into a solvent (e.g. water) to the point that the solvent can hold no more of the solute (In my example, any further sugar crystals would just drop to the bottom), it had reached its P.O.S. Somehow, I think this aptly describes our minds when it comes to advertising. I wonder if we can take much more without any adverse effects. The author starts to delve into this when they mention how children watch ads in the classroom, and in the last sentence [kid singing the ... song]. Actually, most advertisements target children. They want children to see the ads, desire the product, and then beg their parents to buy it. As an additional bonus, this constant message of consumerism at such a young age will ensure that many children wanting (overspending) all sorts of products into adulthood. To illustrate, one study found that Polish families spend the most family time when shopping together. Maybe facts like this, and the rising number of families in perpetual credit card debt, can be taken as evidence of the adverse effects of advertising.

All things considered, we suffer. We are victims of a malady known as overabundant advertising. Maybe one day, a commission will be formed to limit the amount, and location of advertisements companies can use. But until then, one thing is certain. It is only a matter of time before we all begin hearing that Oscar Meyer song in our heads.

Explanation: Paper #1, paragraph 5 begins with a summarizing sentence: “I suppose I’ve written all of this to show, as the author points out, how advertising permeates our entire society.” This sentence connects everything written before, as well as the reading, to this writer’s restatement of the main point. Paper #1, paragraph 6 begins: “All things considered, we suffer.” Once again, the writer reminds us of all that’s been written (“All things considered”) and draws a conclusion.

2. Look at Paper #4, paragraph 3 below to see if the writer is successful in connecting one sentence to the next. (The complete Paper # 4 response is on pp.16-17.) Read paragraph 3 and pick out

the sentence you think best expresses the main point of the paragraph. Is it the first or the last one? Or is it not stated? If not stated, write a sentence stating a main point and revise other sentences in the paragraph to fit it.

The media itself sends us thousands of marketing messages per day. The media explores on the issue of obesity America is suffering with but in the next minutes a fast food restaurant commercial is acknowledged. Followed by video game commercials leading into a weight loss commercial. Advertisements doesn't have a valid message because its advocating to eat while playing video games or watching TV. Although on the contrary it is advised to lose weight because the previous commercials could cause medical problems. The vast amount of advertisements shown are implying on how we should live are lives and most of the population is agreeing with this patetic lifestyle.

Sample Revision: Paper #4, Paragraph 3

The media sends thousands of inconsistent and contradictory messages everyday telling us how to live our lives. One minute, the media explores the issue of obesity that many Americans suffer from, but in the next, it shows a commercial about a fast food restaurant. A commercial of a video game is followed by a weight loss commercial. The message appears to advocate eating while playing video games or watching TV. On the contrary, it could be advising us to lose weight because the previous commercials show what causes medical problems. Most of the population that takes in these commercials ends up agreeing with this pathetic lifestyle.

What do you think of this revision? Do the sentences seem connected? What sentence would you say controls the paragraph? As you review your own writing, check to see that your sentences and ideas are connected and lead from one to another.

How to Write a Summary for the CATW Response

In the *Writing Directions* for the CATW response, you are required to “summarize the passage in your own words, stating the author’s most important ideas.” It is important that you do not copy the author’s ideas directly from the passage when writing your summary. Your goal in this part of the CATW writing task is to demonstrate how well you understand the reading passage, using your own words.

Write the following key ideas from the sample reading, “How to Do One Thing at a Time”, in your own words:

1. “When we attempt demanding tasks simultaneously, we end up doing neither as well as we should because our brains have cognitive limits.”

2. “What’s more, we’re less efficient after we’ve shut down e-mail and turned off our phones.”

3. “The single-taskers did significantly better than their multi-tasking peers.”

4. “A tremendous amount of evidence shows that the brain does better when it’s performing tasks in sequence rather than all at once.”

5. "We still don't know the long-term effects of chronic multi-tasking, but there's no question we're bad at it, and it's bad for us."

6. "Through solutions such as yoga and acupuncture, experts believe we can break our multi-tasking habit and sharpen our focus."

On the following page you will find examples of how to paraphrase these key ideas in the reading passage. Study them and see how closely your own answers resemble the sample answers.

Answers: Summarizing Key Ideas in a CATW Reading Passage

1. "When we attempt demanding tasks simultaneously, we end up doing neither as well as we should because our brains have cognitive limits."

Sample paraphrase: *The reading passage mentions an article in the journal Neuralmage that says when we try to do too many things at once, we end up not doing any of them well because our brains can't handle it.*

2. "What's more, we're also less efficient after we've shut down e-mail and turned off our phones."

Sample paraphrase: *Furthermore, the reading says that even after we stop multi-tasking, we're not as efficient as we could be.*

3. "The single-taskers did significantly better than their multi-tasking peers."

Sample paraphrase: *In addition, a study showed that students who did one thing at a time did better than students who did many things at once.*

4. "A tremendous amount of evidence shows that the brain does better when it's performing tasks in sequence rather than all at once."

Sample paraphrase: *In the reading, a researcher is quoted as saying that there's a lot of evidence that the brain works better doing one thing at a time.*

5. "We still don't know the long-term effects of chronic multi-tasking, but there's no question we're bad at it, and it's bad for us."

Sample paraphrase: *The reading passage also mentions that even though multi-tasking is bad for us, the long-term effects aren't known.*

6. "Through solutions such as yoga and acupuncture, experts believe we can break our multi-tasking habit and sharpen our focus."

Sample paraphrase: *Experts say that we can use things like yoga and acupuncture to break the habit of multi-tasking and learn to focus better.*

How to Refer to the Reading Passage in Your CATW Response

The first two scoring categories on the CATW scoring rubric evaluate your ability to understand the reading passage, and to use your own ideas and experiences to write about specific ideas in the reading passage. You are required to make specific references to the reading passage in your CATW response. Therefore, it is important that you know how to correctly refer to the text.

There are two ways in which you can refer to the reading passage:

1. Indirect reference, or paraphrase: This is when you take an idea from the reading passage and put it into your own words.

For example, in the sample passage *How to Do One Thing at a Time*, the author writes: “A tremendous amount of evidence shows that the brain does better when it’s performing tasks in sequence rather than all at once.” If you wanted to paraphrase this idea, you could write:

In the reading, Clifford Nass, a professor of communication at Stanford University, is quoted as saying that the brain does better when it handles one task at a time.

2. Direct reference, or direct quotation: This is when you use the author’s words exactly as they are written in the reading passage. You must use quotation marks around the author’s exact words.

For example, if we use the same quote as above, a direct quotation would be written like this:

In the reading, Clifford Nass, a professor of communication at Stanford University, states, “A tremendous amount of evidence shows that the brain does better when it’s performing tasks in sequence rather than all at once.”

Notice that in both cases recognition is given to the author of the idea, regardless of whether direct or indirect reference is used. You must always give credit to the original writer of the idea taken from the reading passage if you decide to use it in your CATW response, and it is important to always make a distinction between your ideas and ideas taken from the reading passage.

How to Proofread and Edit Your CATW Response

The *Writing Directions* instruct you to: “Remember to review your essay and make any changes or corrections that are needed to help your reader follow your thinking.” This means that you should spend about 10 minutes at the end of the exam period looking over your work and correcting errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation. You should also read over your entire response to determine if there are any sentences that are unclear or incomplete. Are all of your ideas clearly and fully explained? Have you made specific references to the reading passage throughout your response? Is there a summary of the key points in the reading? Have you used transitions where they are necessary to connect related thoughts and examples?

Practice Exercise

Below is part of a written response to the reading passage “How to Do One Thing at a Time.” Read the response carefully and identify the grammatical and content errors. Then circle or underline the errors and write the corrections above them. Here’s a hint: There are fifteen grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors in the response.

Now think about what kinds of additional details and/or examples might be added to make the writer’s paragraphs stronger and clearer for a reader. Is there an adequate summary of the key points in the reading? Is it clear which idea from the reading the writer is trying to explain in the response? Is the response well organized, and does the writer use transitions to connect ideas?

¹The article have some good point. ²It talks about why it’s a bad idea to do too many things at one time because we end up doing everything wrong. ³Because our brain has limits. ⁴The author says that when you try to do many things simultaneous, we end up not doing any of them good. ⁵The article also says it better for our brain to do one thing at a time and many researches show this is true.

⁶Like the Stamford University expriment. ⁷The reading says we can repair our multi-tasking through experts and concentration. ⁸I think this is true I go to yoga class every weak. ⁹In conclusion, multi-tasking is bad for you and we should stop doing it.

Now, write a few additional details that would make this writer’s response clearer and more specific:

Answers: Proofreading and Editing Exercise

Sentence 1 has one subject-verb agreement error: “article have” should be “*article has*”.

Sentence 2 is correct.

Sentence 3 is an incomplete sentence. There are two ways to correct this error: Join the incomplete sentence to the sentence before it, using a comma before “because”; OR add what’s missing to the incomplete sentence so that it is a complete sentence, in this case a subject and a verb. For example, it should read: “*This is because our brains have limits*”.

Sentence 4 has three grammatical errors. The adjective “simultaneous” is incorrect; the correct word form is the adverb “*simultaneously*”. Secondly, “good” is the wrong word to use in this case; it should be “*well*”. Finally, there is a pronoun agreement error: The writer uses both “we” and “you” in the sentence but should use one pronoun or the other, not both. So, the correct way to write the sentence is, “When we try to do too many things *simultaneously*, we end up not doing any of them as well as we can.”

Sentence 5 has three grammatical errors. The verb “is” is missing at the beginning of the sentence; “it better” should be “it is better”. Also, there is a plural/singular agreement error: “our brain” should be written “*our brains*”. Lastly, “many researches show” is incorrect since “research” is an uncountable noun; therefore, the clause should be written as, “*and research shows this is true*”.

Sentence 6 has three errors. It is an incomplete sentence because it is missing a verb. In addition there are two spelling errors: “Stamford University” should be written “*Stanford University*”, and “exprimtent” should be written “*experiment*”. One way to correct the incomplete sentence, or sentence fragment, is to add what is missing, in this case a verb. An example of how the corrected sentence might be written is, “*One experiment was done at Stanford University*”. By adding the verb “was done”, the sentence is now complete and grammatically correct.

Sentence 7 is incorrect because it doesn’t make grammatical sense and the writer’s meaning is unclear. The way to correct this sentence is to re-write it so that it is clear and grammatically

correct. For example, the writer’s original sentence—“The reading says we can repair our multi-tasking through experts and concentration”—could be re-written to read: *“The reading says that by using experts and increasing our concentration, we can stop multi-tasking”*.

Sentence 8 has two grammatical errors. First, the sentence is a run-on; this is when two or more sentences are written together without the punctuation or use of conjunctions necessary to separate the different ideas they contain. In this case, “This is true I go to yoga class every weak” should instead be written: *“This is true because I go to yoga class every weak”*. Secondly, “weak” is the wrong word to use here; it should be *“week”*.

Sentence 9 has a pronoun agreement error: “multi-tasking is bad for you and we should stop doing it” should be written *“multi-tasking is bad for us and we should stop doing it”*.

So, how did you do?

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