



# **A GUIDE TO PREPARATION FOR SKILLS TESTING IN ENGLISH**

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## General Tips for Improving Your Test Scores

*The following suggestions are meant to help you prepare for an assessment of your reading comprehension skills on a Standardized Test administered in a group testing environment. If you are doing an individual assessment you can ask an advisor for more information on the content of your assessment.*

### **Read/Skim the Passages**

This advice may sound simple; however, many students do not read the passages. Instead, they read the questions and then search for the answers in the reading selections. This approach might be useful if the key ideas and details were always stated clearly. More often than not, however, these ideas are stated indirectly. You are better off reading the passage first. This is the most productive use of your time.

### **Cover up the Answers to the Questions**

After you read the passage, you will be ready to answer the questions. The best way to do this is by covering up the multiple answers given to each question. After you have read the question, predict the answer; then look to see if your answer is one of the multiple answer choices. If you have not stated the answer exactly as written, search for the closest match. You may have to return to the reading passage to locate the answer.

### **Use Wait Time**

Research has shown that students who do not take time to think about and reflect upon test questions do not do as well as those who do. Therefore, your score is likely to improve, if after you read the question, you wait about ten seconds before marking your answer sheet. This delay can prevent you from answering impulsively.

### **Skip Questions**

If you are unsure of an answer, do one of two things. You can leave the item blank and come back to it after you finish the other questions for the passage. If you skip a question, however, be sure you skip a line on your answer sheet.

The other choice is to go ahead and make your best guess but put a pencil mark beside it so that you can go back to it later on.

## **Be Aware of the Time**

Standardized tests are usually timed and the time limits are set so that most people can finish. You do need to be aware of the time and not to spend too much time on any one item. Remember that each item is worth the same amount of credit. Divide your time evenly. Planning how to spend your time will improve your overall test performance.

## **Do Not Leave Any Questions Blank**

Unless there is a penalty for guessing, do not leave any questions blank. If there is no penalty mark an answer for every question, even if you have to guess.

## **Save Some Time for Review**

If at all possible, allow yourself some time at the end to review your test. Reviewing the test will allow you some time to catch careless errors.

## **Reading Information and Practice Exercises**

These reading exercises will help you become familiar with what you need to do during North Island College's English reading assessment (as done in group placement testing). Since August 2009 North Island College has been using the CAT/4 to assess English Skills in group testing. If you are doing an individual assessment you may or may not use the CAT/4.

The CAT/4 comes in various levels to assess students in elementary through post secondary educational facilities. North Island College uses Levels 19 and 20-22. You may be doing one of these two assessments. The assessment that you take will consist of two sections, both of which are timed. The first section assesses vocabulary (25-30 minutes) and the second, reading comprehension (55-60 minutes). In the reading assessment you will be asked to read and answer questions about several reading selections. In order to simulate the assessment situation you can answer the questions below, allowing yourself 10-15 minutes. The answers can be found on page 8.

**Read each question carefully and then choose the best answer. You may find it helpful to read all the possible answers before making a choice. For this simulated session you can mark your answers right on the page. After you have completed the practice questions, check your answers with the answer key. (Reprinted with permission from Camosun College)**

### **Vocabulary**

This section consists of items requiring you to recognize words that have a similar or opposite meaning to an underlined word. Five examples are provided.

In items 1-3 choose the word or phrase that means the **same** or **about the same** as the underlined word.

1. Hammering nails was a tedious job
  - a. listless
  - b. noxious
  - c. tiresome
  - d. inspiring
  
2. She chose to embellish the story
  - a. flourish
  - b. attack
  - c. enfold
  - d. decorate
  
3. The wolf started to corner the quarry
  - a. prey
  - b. argument
  - c. decoy
  - d. excavation

In items 4-5, choose the word that means the opposite of the underlined word.

4. His actions had dire consequences
  - a. involved
  - b. dreadful
  - c. unimportant
  - d. humiliating
  
5. She would always pamper the child
  - a. please
  - b. scold
  - c. coddle
  - d. diaper

### Reading Comprehension

The actual assessment requires you to read several passages and answer 40 or 48 questions in 55 or 60 minutes; the timing factor requires you to read fluently with understanding. The paragraphs below are taken from an article written by Lon Woods a columnist with the *Times Colonist*. This article appeared May 14, 1993. The paragraphs are numbered.

1. Zeus outdid himself this week, ripping apart clouds bedded down for the night over Juan de Fuca Strait, hurling mile-high spears of lightning to unleash rain globs big as golf balls. Amid thunderclaps earsplitting as any in prairie boyhood, I stood atop the lookout on King George Terrace – drenched but excited as a kid. The pyrotechnics were so brilliant my eyes felt bruised in the morning.
2. Walking sunn, wet streets streaming with the first real heat of spring, it seemed the midnight tempest had cleared my perspective of static cling and cobwebs. With neurons unclogged, my recharged senses were strangely keen for adventures the life of which I'd abandoned 40 years ago.
3. Could it be I'd been struck by lightning, thrown into a personal episode of Back to the Future? What else accounts for the quivering urge to break from the walk to work – and climb a tree like a carefree 10-year-old? Alas. Simply slowing my pace at the base of a cedar in Stadacona Park drew such looks of dismay from two young women splashing around on the nearby tennis court I scotched my climbing ambition. Explaining would be a nasty job.
4. On Pembroke Street, more loitering while city pavers pulled away from two freshly-poured panels of sidewalk, moist and glistening like great slabs of clay-colored cheesecake. The impulse to press initials into the wet walkway was strong – but it too, was stifled.
5. The trek resumed and spring's first warm sun grew hot, bringing the simmering urge for an out-of-doors day closer to a boil. Perhaps I could skip work and scour the streets for pop tins and bottles? The temptation was skewered by the prospect of scouring the streets for something else – like a job.

## Questions

1. The selection is mainly about how the writer
  - a. was affected by being hit by lightning
  - b. decided to spend the day in boyhood pursuits
  - c. witnessed a lightning storm
  - d. was affected by a lightning storm
  
2. The writer suggests the cause of the storm was
  - a. clouds over Juan de Fuca Strait
  - b. the Greek god Zeus
  - c. thunderclaps as loud as prairie thunder
  - d. colliding warm and cold air masses
  
3. The writer uses a simile to compare rain drops to
  - a. globs
  - b. golf balls
  - c. mile-high spears
  - d. clouds bedded down
  
4. The underlined word scotched in paragraph #3 means
  - a. encouraged
  - b. dissuaded
  - c. blocked
  - d. persuaded
  
5. Which best describes the writer's feelings about the storm?
  - a. exhilaration
  - b. fear
  - c. trepidation
  - d. anxiety
  
6. The writer suggests that following his inclination for the day might result in
  - a. spending the day collecting pop bottles
  - b. losing his job
  - c. climbing trees
  - d. retrieving coins from sidewalk grates
  
7. How does the writer account for his reaction to the storm?
  - a. static cling and cobwebs
  - b. earsplitting thunderclaps
  - c. bruised eyes
  - d. recharged senses

**ANSWERS:**

**Vocabulary**

1. c

2. d

3. a

4. c

5. b

**Comprehension**

1. d

2. b

3. b

4. c

5. a

6. b

7. d

## Preparing for the Writing Sample

This important part of the English assessment requires students to plan and write a composition in about an hour. In the testing situation students will be given a selection of topics to choose from. Students are asked to choose one of the topics to write on, basing their writing selections on their interests and opinions. Students testing in the group situation will usually be asked to write a multi-paragraph essay. Students in individual testing may be asked to write a one paragraph composition.

The writing sample will be marked on the basis of skills necessary in academic and career programs at North Island College. Some of these skills are the ability to organize information, accurate grammar and punctuation, careful use of vocabulary and fluency of writing style.

If a student has not had much recent experience with writing, especially in essay format it would be a good idea to do a little practicing. The first step to remember is to spend some time planning what is to be written and planning the order in which points will be made. When writing is not preplanned ideas often do not flow in logical order and opinions may not be supported with examples.

Students are advised to write on a topic of personal interest. Staying on the topic is crucial. If the student has remembered to do some planning then there will be a framework that can be followed to present and support ideas and opinions. Students are strongly advised to reread what is written in order to catch careless grammatical errors.

Essays must include an introduction and a conclusion. Each paragraph must have an introductory sentence that introduces the topic of that paragraph and a concluding thought which closes out the topic. For more information about writing an essay see the next section.

## Essay writing

- a standard short essay consists of an introductory paragraph, the body (1-3 paragraphs) and a one paragraph conclusion (note – one sentence is NOT a paragraph!)
- the **introductory paragraph** of an essay should serve as an introduction to the topic and the point of view of the writer on the topic
- the **body** includes one paragraph for each supporting point. Each paragraph should have a topic sentence that introduces the point to be discussed in each paragraph
- the **concluding paragraph** summarizes by restating briefly and reinforces the major points.

Further details about essay writing can be found in the following books in the North Island College Library:

Essay Essentials/Brian Green

PE 1471 N68 1995

College Writing Skills/John Langan

PE 1408 L3170 1988

Fit to Print/Joanne Buckley

LB 2369 B83 1991

If you have written only paragraphs in school or if it has been a long time, practice writing paragraphs and then essays. Write a paragraph that includes a topic sentence, supporting ideas, specific detail to support the ideas and a concluding sentence. Practice writing paragraphs that are 11-14 sentences in length. You could use the following template:

**Topic** \_\_\_\_\_

**Topic Sentence** \_\_\_\_\_

**First example/reason** \_\_\_\_\_

**Detail** \_\_\_\_\_

**Detail** \_\_\_\_\_

**Second example/reason** \_\_\_\_\_

**Detail** \_\_\_\_\_

**Detail** \_\_\_\_\_

**Third example/reason** \_\_\_\_\_

**Detail** \_\_\_\_\_

**Detail** \_\_\_\_\_

**Concluding Sentence** \_\_\_\_\_

In the writing of an essay or a paragraph, use transitional words and phrases. Transitional words/phrases signal that the writer is changing to a new thought and help guide the reader from one idea to the next. Start each new idea with a transition (words like first, second, finally, on the other hand) and use a transition in the concluding sentence that indicates this is a concluding statement (for example, in conclusion).