

It can be very intimidating to think that you have to keep all of this in mind as you write a 40-minute essay. It helps, though, if you remember that this essay is part of the ACT, and what do you typically have to do on the ACT? Fill in bubbles. Think of this essay as just another one of those bubbles: all the pieces should basically be in place before you even get to the test.

## THE APPROACH

You may not know what the prompt will ask about, but you can at least go into the test with a consistent approach. You can approach each prompt the same way, and your essay can look very similar each time.

Just remember these four basic steps.

### The Basic Approach for the Writing Test

1. Work the Prompt.
2. Work the Perspectives.
3. Generate Your Own Perspective.
4. Consider Context.

Let's use each of these steps to break down the given prompt.

## Step 1: Work the Prompt

Let's have another look at the prompt.

Many colleges and universities have cut their humanities departments, and high schools have started to shift their attention much more definitively toward STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) and away from ELA (English, Language Arts). Representatives from both school boards and government organizations suggest that the move toward STEM is necessary in helping students to participate in a meaningful way in the American workplace. Given the urgency of this debate for the future of education and society at as whole, it is worth examining the potential consequences of this shift in how students are educated in the United States.

## «STEP 1

In order to work the prompt, we'll need to clarify a few things.

First, we should identify the major *terms* of the prompt. Give this a try.

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The answers you came up with are probably some version of these terms: *education*, *schools*, *STEM*, *ELA*, and *workplace*.

The next task is a little more complex. Figure out the central relationship in those terms, and identify the possible points of *tension* within those terms. In other words, what in the prompt requires you to weigh in? Why is this relationship still the subject of debate and not a done deal?

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This task is a little tougher, but it's essential. Try to pick two or three of the terms you identified as key, and write a sentence describing their relationship.

You may come up with something like this:

*If schools prepare students for the workplace, what should students be learning in schools?*

Or like this:

*Schools should weigh ELA and STEM differently depending on what those schools care about teaching.*

You may have come up with something different, and that's fine. The real test will come in the next step when you read the three perspectives provided. If those seem to address the central tension you've described, you're in good shape.

## Step 2: Work the Perspectives

## «STEP 2

Typically, the three perspectives will be split: one *for*, one *against*, and one *in the middle*. Your job in Step 2 is to identify these perspectives, and to try to figure out what they have to say to each other.

It doesn't matter whether you agree or disagree with the perspectives. Assess them *as arguments* first and foremost.

Let's have another look at the perspectives before we get started.

Perspective One	Perspective Two	Perspective Three
<p>ELA programs should be emphasized over STEM programs. Education is not merely a means to employment: ELA education helps students to live more meaningful lives. In addition, an exclusively STEM-based program cannot help but limit students' creativity and lead them to overemphasize the importance of money and other tangible gains.</p>	<p>ELA programs should be eradicated entirely, except to establish the basic literacy necessary to engage in the hard sciences, mathematics, and business. Reading and writing are activities that are best saved for the leisure of students who enjoy them.</p>	<p>ELA and STEM programs should always be in equal balance with one another. Both are necessary to providing a student with a well-rounded education. Moreover, equal emphasis will allow the fullest possible exposure to many subjects before students choose their majors and careers.</p>

Which perspective is *for* emphasizing STEM programs over ELA programs? What does this perspective consider? What does it overlook?

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Which perspective is *against* emphasizing STEM programs over ELA programs? What does this perspective consider? What does it overlook?

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Which perspective is *in the middle* on the question of emphasizing STEM programs over ELA programs? What does this perspective consider? What does it overlook?

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You may have come up with something like this:

For (Perspective 2): This perspective takes fully seriously the idea that education leads to employment, and as a result, it sees no value in ELA programs at all because those programs do not have any tangible benefits in the workplace. What this perspective misses, however, is that ELA could have some applicability to the world of work (in marketing, for instance, or in other creative spheres). Nor does it give any serious consideration to the idea that education could be good on its own.

Against (Perspective 1): This perspective is absolutely against the idea of allowing STEM programs to take over, even if those programs do lead to more employability. Perspective 1 says that education should be independent of the workplace and should be more about how to live life. What this perspective misses, however, is that de-emphasis of STEM programs is not practical in the contemporary world, which privileges STEM and technical knowledge. Perspective 1 also severs the link between education and employability too definitively: they must have something to do with each other!

In the middle (Perspective 3): This perspective is in favor of the status quo, which has STEM and ELA programs in equal balance with one another. It says that only a variety of exposure will allow students to find their niches within the workplace. What this perspective misses, however, is that if there is a link between education and employment, this variety is potentially irrelevant. It also overlooks the idea that there is a crisis in education, which is the whole impetus for the previous two ideas.

Your working of the perspectives may not look exactly like this, but that's okay. As long as you've identified where each perspective stands (*for*, *against*, or *in the middle*) and then identified at least one shortcoming of each perspective, you're in good shape for the next step: generating your own perspective.

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## Step 3: Generate Your Own Perspective

Now that you've outlined the prompt and the perspectives, it's time to generate your own. You'll draw from each of the perspectives, and you may side with one of them, but your perspective should have something unique about it.

Come up with your own perspective! If you merely restate one of the three given perspectives, you won't be able to get into the highest scoring ranges.

Start by describing your perspective.

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Just so you have a sense of how to build this perspective, we've included one of our own. This is not to say that this perspective is correct—remember, there is no correct answer! It's just an effective argument that would generate a high score.

*In my view, the question of how education and the workplace are related to each other misses the point. The cause and effect is wrong, and the very fact that we can ask this question shows that a significant change has already taken place. The prompt asks us to explain what the most effective link between school and workplace is, but that already presumes that there is a link between school and workplace, which is not necessarily universally true. Before we can answer the question of whether STEM programs should be emphasized over ELA programs, we should first wonder whether we'd like to proceed with this linkage between education and workplace. Understanding this linkage is essential because if we find that social prejudices are shaping education without seeming to do so, we will likely find that the potential for innovation and creativity shrinks, and all the technical knowledge in the world won't save us.*

Now that you've generated your own perspective, check it against the perspectives already given.

How does your perspective compare to Perspective One?

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*My perspective is probably closest to Perspective One, but it differs from Perspective One in that it refuses to engage in the question of employment. Perspective One is limited because, especially at the end, it tries to make a case for ELA as employable skills, which is not particularly viable.*

How does your perspective compare to Perspective Two?

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*My perspective is furthest from Perspective Two, though the disagreement is not so explicit as to say, "Perspective Two, you're wrong!" Instead, my perspective shows that Perspective Two is wrapped up in all kinds of assumptions and prejudices of which the author of Perspective Two is seemingly unaware.*

How does your perspective compare to Perspective Three?

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*My perspective has a different aim from that of Perspective Three. Perspective Three is interested in maintaining a balance, but only because he or she sees that balance as advantageous in determining one's eventual employment. In my view, Perspective Three is the worst of both worlds: it has a loose grip on the status quo while at the same time accepting premises that there is no good reason to accept.*

If you were able to differentiate your view from all three perspectives while your view remained intact, congratulations! You're on your way to a great score! There's just one more thing...the bigger picture.

# **STEP 4**

## **Step 4: Consider Context**

As you build your argument, remember that the graders are looking to see a complex mind at work. Examples are important, but they exist mainly to help you structure and discuss your perspective and why you have that perspective. Examples can come from anywhere, but they should be reasonable, and they should have a clear application to your argument.

To start, list the examples you'll use to make your argument, and identify how they will help you make that argument. Try to come up with at least two.

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*I'm going to use one example that has a direct application to what's being discussed in the prompt: Albert Einstein. I'm going to use another that shows why the discussion may be irrelevant: the question of human happiness.*

Now describe the order in which you'll discuss your examples and why.

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*I'm going to discuss the examples in the order I've given above. That way my essay will start by discussing the prompt directly and will then broaden out to show the larger question of which the prompt is part.*

## THE TEMPLATE

You’ve done a lot of prework, and now it’s time to put it all in essay form. Remember, though, that you are taking a *standardized test*, so it will help you to be as *standardized* as possible in your presentation. If you come in knowing basically what your essay will look like, you’ll have a much easier time saying all you need to say.

If you already know what your template will look like, great. The best essays always reveal something personal about the writer and his or her complex mind.

If you’re not sure what your essay will look like, never fear! Below, we outline a basic template that will have space for all the good stuff you just did in your pre-writing.

## Introduction

A good introduction will lay out the terms of the *conversation* in which the writer is planning to participate. It will give the reader a preview of what is to come and will, hopefully, encourage the reader to keep reading. In roughly three to five sentences, try out the following:

1. Identify *why* the question posed in the prompt is important.
2. Present your perspective on the question posed in the prompt.
3. Preview how you intend to give support to your perspective.

Based on the pre-writing we did above, here is an example of an effective introduction.

*“We want our students to have the best education possible.” We’ve heard enough politicians say it to know that this idea is more or less a truth universally acknowledged. The problem comes when we start to think in a real way about what that “best” education could be. Recently, the rhetoric surrounding educational policy has been all about the importance of STEM programs—improving them, foregrounding them, and making them more attractive to all students. The idea motivating this rhetoric is economic. School is preparation for the workplace; therefore, students should become best educated in the subjects that will make them most employable. This seems like sound logic, but it is not the only possible conclusion, nor even necessarily the best one. The more essential task, in my view, is to clarify what a “good education” is and, in a much larger sense, what we want from our lives.*

This introduction is effective because it shows the broader context into which the prompt fits: that of education reform in the country as a whole. The introduction then goes on to show a potential problem with asking the question itself: the not-so-universal agreement on what a “good education” is. Then, the introduction is particularly effective at stating the essay’s goal: to analyze the three perspectives, to show their limitations, and to show why a different question may get more squarely to the root of the problem.



## Body Paragraphs

Body paragraphs provide your reader with the details and examples of your discussion. Try to generate one body paragraph for each example you discuss (usually two or three). Make sure that your body paragraphs do the following:

1. Provide a transition from the previous paragraph and a topic sentence that describes the new one.
2. Assess at least one of the perspectives given in the prompt as a way to strengthen your own perspective.
3. Use an example to develop your perspective or analyze one of the given perspectives.
4. Relate your discussion back to your position and the larger topic.

Based on the pre-writing exercises, here's an example of an effective body paragraph.

You may ask, then, which do I think is better? ELA or STEM? The idea that one would need to choose is part of the problem. Albert Einstein said, "Imagination is more important than knowledge." Now, you'd think that Einstein (the father of twentieth-century STEM, basically) would love the idea of turning all students into little scientists and mathematicians. What Einstein believed, and what his life showed, however, are far different. Einstein understood that all knowledge was valuable but that the imaginative things one does with that knowledge are even more valuable. One would be hard-pressed to find a great mind that was not richly educated across the subjects, from ELA to STEM and beyond. As a result, those who argue solely in favor of either ELA or STEM both miss the point in suggesting the overemphasis of one subject group over another. As Einstein's example shows, what one learns is less important than how one applies that knowledge, and one's possibilities for breadth and imagination necessarily increase with the acquisition of many types of knowledge.

This is an effective body paragraph because it analyzes two or three perspectives given in the prompt. Notice that you do not need to (nor should you) write "Perspective One..." The graders are looking for you to include the ideas of the perspectives but not to mention them directly. The paragraph gives an example, Albert Einstein, to show the limitations of both of those perspectives while supporting the author's own perspective.

The paragraph also contains an implied transition to the next paragraph, especially because the reader may now believe that if the author is neither *for* nor *against*, he or she must be *in the middle*. As we know from the introduction, however, this may not be the case, and we should read on to find out.

If you want to know what the author's next body paragraph says, good! That means the author has your interest. Think about some of the ways that has happened. What do you want to know? What questions has the author left unanswered? What else do you want to contribute to the *conversation*?

Try your own paragraph. Even if our perspective doesn't match yours, try to think along with us here. You'll find it's a useful exercise: ACT Writing is not the place to express your deepest thoughts but to develop your most complex argument.

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What did you do well in that argument? What could you have improved? Do you need a third paragraph before you hit the conclusion?

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## Conclusion

Even though you may be running out of time, it's important to write a conclusion. It gives your essay a completeness that it might not otherwise have. An effective conclusion will usually do the following:

1. Recap your discussion as it has related to the prompt and perspectives
2. Restate your perspective and arguments
3. Provide a final overarching thought on the topic

Here's an example of an effective conclusion.

In short, the question of a STEM focus versus an ELA emphasis forces us to ask an even larger question. What is education? Is it job training? Is it life training? Education reform creates larger changes than many of us realize, and it therefore requires more reflection. While we are comfortable in the idea that education creates members of society, we should also see that society creates a certain type of education. Before we implement these changes, we need to be very certain what our goals are, especially in the very long term.

This conclusion is effective because it summarizes what the author has said without restating it outright. It also pushes the discussion toward a different, larger question, showing that the author has a broader understanding of what is going on in the prompt.

Now, here's the full essay in all its glory.

"We want our students to have the best education possible." We've heard enough politicians say it to know that this idea is more or less a truth universally acknowledged. The problem comes when we start to think in a real way about what that "best" education could be. Recently, the rhetoric surrounding educational policy has been all about the importance of STEM programs—improving them, foregrounding them, and making them more attractive to all students. The idea motivating this rhetoric is economic. School is preparation for the workplace; therefore, students should become best educated in the subjects that will make them most employable. This seems like sound logic, but it is not the only possible conclusion, nor even necessarily the best one. The more essential task, in my view, is to clarify what a "good education" is and, in a much larger sense, what we want from our lives.

You may ask, then, which do I think is better? ELA or STEM? The idea that one would need to choose is part of the problem. Albert Einstein said, "Imagination is more important than knowledge." Now, you'd think that Einstein (the father of twentieth-century STEM, basically) would love the idea of turning all students into little scientists and mathematicians. What Einstein believed, and what his life showed, however, are far different. Einstein understood that all knowledge was valuable but that the imaginative things one does with that knowledge are even more valuable. One would be hard-pressed to find a great mind that was not richly educated across the subjects, from ELA to STEM and beyond. As a result, those who argue solely in favor of either ELA or STEM both miss the point in suggesting the overemphasis of one subject group over another. As Einstein's example shows, what one learns is less important than how one applies that knowledge, and one's possibilities for breadth and imagination necessarily increase with the acquisition of many types of knowledge.

This is not to say, however, that education must involve an equal portion of STEM and ELA. While there is some value in maintaining a balance between ELA and STEM subjects, the idea that such balance is a necessity is wildly misdirected. While it is to be hoped that all adults will be gainfully employed once they leave school, the idea that school should be all geared towards employability is disappointing. As Einstein's example shows, there is more to learning than employability, and even if STEM programs were somehow foregrounded, the lack of ELA programs would limit how imaginatively and creatively students could interpret their data. And let's not overlook the biggest problem of all: if all knowledge acquisition is geared toward how much money it can make us, then to what have we reduced the meaning of our lives? This rhetoric of schools as training sites can lead to only one place: five-year-olds who believe that the only purpose anyone could have on this Earth is to get a good job and make money. Is that a world you'd want to live in? Consider yourself lucky to have the capacity to imagine such a world!

In short, the question of a STEM focus versus an ELA emphasis forces us to ask an even larger question. What is education? Is it job training? Is it life training? Education reform creates larger changes than many of us realize, and it therefore requires more reflection. While we are comfortable in the idea that education creates members of society, we should also see that society creates a certain type of education. Before we implement these changes, we need to be very certain what our goals are, especially in the very long term.

## A CONCLUSION OF OUR OWN

We know that this can seem like a lot to do in 40 minutes, especially for something that won't count toward your composite. We can't help you with the composite part, but we can say this: the essay becomes easier with practice.

And now that you're an expert at the ACT Writing section, here are a few other things to keep in mind.

1. **Length.** ACT graders tend to reward longer essays. On the ACT Online Test, aim for at least 500 words (you won't have a word count function, so practice to learn about how long that is). On the pencil-and-paper ACT, make sure you get onto the second page and the third if possible. If your writing tends to be small, you may want to practice writing larger, especially because it will also make your essay a bit neater and easier to read. If your handwriting is large, make sure you write an extra page to compensate.
2. **Sentence structure.** Varying your sentence structure helps to improve the rhythm of your essay. If you write a really long sentence with lots of modifiers and dependent clauses, it sometimes helps to follow it with a shorter, more direct sentence. It really works. Don't try to be too fancy, though. The longer the sentence is, the more opportunity there is to confuse the reader or to make a grammatical mistake.
3. **Diction.** Diction refers to word choice. You certainly want to sprinkle some nice vocabulary words throughout your paper. But make sure to use and spell them correctly. If you're uncertain about the meaning or spelling of a word, it's best just to pick a different word. Using a big word incorrectly makes a worse impression than using a smaller word correctly.
4. **Neatness.** Use capital letters at the beginning of sentences. Break your writing into paragraphs. On the pencil-and-paper ACT, make sure you indent each new paragraph. Align your essay using the lines on the paper. Don't go over the lines or write down the side of the page. Avoid messy cross-outs. Although the grader should not take these kinds of things into consideration when determining your grade, a neat, legible essay will be easier to read. Your grader will read hundreds, if not thousands, of essays. A neat essay will make the grader happier.