

ARCHITECTURE

OF THE

[ cla ] TASKS



## Note to Reader

Click on the light green boxes on the left and other pages to jump to the section referenced or back to this page.

Introduction

Task Description

Performance Task

Analytic Writing Task

Task Development

Scoring Criteria

Assessing Critical Thinking, Analytic Reasoning and Problem Solving Skills

Assessing Writing Skills

Scoring Process

Score Sheet

Scoring Procedure

Performance Task: Crime Reduction

Introduction

Document Library

Question 1

Central Aim of the Question

Analytic Scoring Items for Question 1

High Quality Response and Key Characteristics

Moderate Quality Response and Key Characteristics

Low Quality Response and Key Characteristics

Make-an-Argument: Government Funding

Introduction

Prompt

Scoring Criteria

High Quality Response and Key Characteristics

Moderate Quality Response and Key Characteristics

Low Quality Response and Key Characteristics

Critique-an-Argument: Weddings

Introduction

Prompt

Scoring Criteria

High Quality Response and Key Characteristics

Moderate Quality Response and Key Characteristics

Low Quality Response and Key Characteristics

Additional Resources: CLA in the Classroom

# INTRODUCTION

The CLA is comprised of three types of prompts within two types of task: the Performance Task and the Analytic Writing Task. Most students take one task or the other. The Analytic Writing Task includes a pair of prompts called Make-an-Argument and Critique-an-Argument.

The CLA uses direct measures of skills in which students perform cognitively demanding tasks from which quality of response is scored. All CLA measures are administered online and contain open-ended prompts that require constructed responses. There are no multiple choice questions. The CLA tasks require that students integrate critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving, and written communication skills. The holistic integration of these skills on the CLA tasks mirrors the requirements of serious thinking and writing tasks faced in life outside of the classroom.

This document provides you with an excerpted example of a retired Performance Task and an example of an Analytic Writing Task. The Crime Reduction Performance Task was delivered as part of the CLA from fall 2005 through spring 2007, after which it was retired. The Make-an-Argument and Critique-an-Argument prompts presented here to represent the Analytic Writing Task were not delivered as part of the CLA, but they were developed by our measurement scientist team and underwent initial field-testing. They remain in the same spirit, format, and construction as our “live” Make-an-Argument and Critique-an-Argument prompts.

Please note that these examples were not chosen to represent the range in CLA prompt topics. Rather, they reflect how prompts with different scenarios can assess similar concepts (e.g., the concept of causation versus correlation appears in both the Crime Reduction Performance Task and the Weddings Critique-an-Argument prompt) as well as how prompts with different main concepts can be presented through similar scenarios (e.g., both the Crime Reduction Performance Task and the Government Funding Make-an-Argument prompt present crime as a policy issue).

[Back to contents](#)

## Performance Task

Each Performance Task requires students to use an integrated set of critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving, and written communication skills to answer several open-ended questions about a hypothetical but realistic situation. In addition to directions and questions, each Performance Task also has its own document library that includes a range of information sources, such as letters, memos, summaries of research reports, newspaper articles, maps, photographs, diagrams, tables, charts, and interview notes or transcripts. Students are instructed to use these materials in preparing their answers to the Performance Task's questions within the allotted 90 minutes.

The first portion of each Performance Task contains general instructions and introductory material. The student is then presented with a split screen. On the right side of the screen is a list of the materials in the Document Library. The student selects a particular document to view by using a pull-down menu. On the left side of the screen are a question and a response box. There is no limit on how much a student can type. When a student completes a question, he or she then selects the next question in the queue.

No two Performance Tasks assess the exact same combination of skills. Some ask students to identify and then compare and contrast the strengths and limitations of alternative hypotheses, points of view, courses of action, etc. To perform these and other tasks, students may have to weigh different types of evidence, evaluate the credibility of various documents, spot possible bias, and identify questionable or critical assumptions.

Performance Tasks also may ask students to suggest or select a course of action to resolve conflicting or competing strategies and then provide a rationale for that decision, including why it is likely to be better than one or more other approaches. For example, students may be asked to anticipate potential difficulties or hazards that are associated with different ways of dealing with a problem, including the likely short- and long-term consequences and implications of these strategies. Students may then be asked to suggest and defend one or more of these approaches. Alternatively, students may be asked to review a collection of materials or a set of options, analyze and organize them on multiple dimensions, and then defend that organization.

Performance Tasks often require students to marshal evidence from different sources; distinguish rational from emotional arguments and fact from opinion; understand data in tables and figures; deal with inadequate, ambiguous, and/or conflicting information; spot deception and holes in the arguments made by others; recognize information that is and is not relevant to the task at hand; identify additional information that would help to resolve issues; and weigh, organize, and synthesize information from several sources.

# TASK DESCRIPTION

All of the Performance Tasks require students to present their ideas clearly, including justifying their points of view. For example, they might note the specific ideas or sections in the document library that support their position and describe the flaws or shortcomings in the arguments' underlying alternative approaches.

## Analytic Writing Task

Students write answers to two types of essay prompts, namely: a “Make-an-Argument” question that asks them to support or reject a position on some issue; and a “Critique-an-Argument” question that asks them to evaluate the validity of an argument made by someone else. Both of these tasks measure a student’s skill in articulating complex ideas, examining claims and evidence, supporting ideas with relevant reasons and examples, sustaining a coherent discussion, and using standard written English.

A “Make-an-Argument” prompt typically presents an opinion on some issue and asks students to write, in 45 minutes, a persuasive, analytic essay to support a position on the issue. Key elements include: establishing a thesis or a position on an issue; maintaining the thesis throughout the essay; supporting the thesis with relevant and persuasive examples (e.g., from personal experience, history, art, literature, pop culture, or current events); anticipating and countering opposing arguments to the position, fully developing ideas, examples, and arguments; crafting an overall response that generates interest, provokes thought, and persuades the reader; organizing the structure of the essay (e.g., paragraphing, ordering of ideas and sentences within paragraphs); employing transitions and varied sentence structure to maintain the flow of the argument; and utilizing sophisticated grammar and vocabulary.

A “Critique-an-Argument” prompt asks students, in 30 minutes, to critique an argument by discussing how well reasoned they find it to be (rather than simply agreeing or disagreeing with the position presented). Key elements of the essay include: identifying a variety of logical flaws or fallacies in a specific argument; explaining how or why the logical flaws affect the conclusions in that argument; and presenting a critique in a written response that is a grammatically correct, organized, well-developed, logically sound, and neutral in tone.

[Back to contents](#)

## Development of CLA Tasks

Task development occurs through an iterative process.

A team of researchers and writers generate ideas for Make-an-Argument and Critique-an-Argument prompts, and Performance Task storylines, and then contribute to the development and revision of the prompts and Performance Task documents.

For Analytic Writing Tasks, multiple prompts are generated, revised and pre-piloted, and those prompts that elicit good critical thinking and writing responses during pre-piloting are further revised and submitted to more extensive piloting.

During the development of Performance Tasks, care is taken to ensure that sufficient information is provided to permit multiple reasonable solutions to the issues present in the Performance Task. Documents are crafted such that information is presented in multiple formats (e.g., tables, figures, news articles, editorials, letters, etc.).

While developing a Performance Task, a list of the intended content from each document is established and revised. This list is used to ensure that each piece of information is clearly reflected in the document and/or across documents, and to ensure that no additional pieces of information are embedded in the document that were not intended. This list serves as a draft starting point for the analytic scoring items used in the Performance Task scoring rubrics. During revision, information is either added to documents or removed from documents to ensure that students could arrive at approximately three or four different conclusions based on a variety of evidence to back up each conclusion. Typically, some conclusions are designed to be supported better than others. Questions for the performance task are also drafted and revised during the development of the documents. The questions are designed such that the initial questions prompt the student to read and attend to multiple sources of information in the documents, and later questions require the student to evaluate the documents and then use their analysis to draw conclusions and justify those conclusions using information from the documents.

After several rounds of revision, the most promising of the Performance Tasks and the Make-an-Argument and Critique-an-Argument prompts are selected for pre-piloting. Student responses from the pilot test are examined to identify what pieces of information are unintentionally ambiguous, what pieces of information in the documents should be removed, etc. After revision and additional pre-piloting, the best functioning tasks (i.e., those that elicit the intended types and ranges of student responses) are selected for full piloting.

During piloting, students complete both an operational task and one of the new tasks. At this point, draft scoring rubrics are revised and tested in grading the pilot responses, and final revisions are made to the tasks to ensure that the task is eliciting the types of responses intended.

[Back to contents](#)

This section summarizes the types of questions addressed by CLA scoring of all task types. Because each CLA task and their scoring rubrics differ, not every item listed is applicable to every task. The tasks cover different aspects of critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving, and writing and in doing so can, in combination, better assess the entire domain of performance.

## [Assessing Critical Thinking, Analytic Reasoning and Problem Solving Skills](#)

Applied in combination, critical thinking, analytic reasoning and problem solving skills are required to perform well on CLA tasks. We define these skills as how well students can evaluate and analyze source information, and subsequently to draw conclusions and present an argument based upon that analysis. In scoring, we specifically consider the following items to be important aspects of these skills.

### [Evaluation of evidence](#)

How well does the student assess the quality and relevance of evidence, including:

- Determining what information is or is not pertinent to the task at hand;
- Distinguishing between rational claims and emotional ones, fact from opinion;
- Recognizing the ways in which the evidence might be limited or compromised;
- Spotting deception and holes in the arguments of others; and
- Considering all sources of evidence?

### [Analysis and synthesis of evidence](#)

How well does the student analyze and synthesize data and information, including:

- Presenting his/her own analysis of the data or information (rather than “as is”);
- Committing or failing to recognize logical flaws (e.g., distinguishing correlation from causation);
- Breaking down the evidence into its component parts;
- Drawing connections between discrete sources of data and information; and
- Attending to contradictory, inadequate or ambiguous information?

### [Drawing conclusions](#)

How well does the student form a conclusion from their analysis, including:

- Constructing cogent arguments rooted in data/information rather than speculation/opinion;
- Selecting the strongest set of supporting data;
- Prioritizing components of the argument;
- Avoiding overstated or understated conclusions; and
- Identifying holes in the evidence and subsequently suggesting additional information that might resolve the issue?

[Back to contents](#)

## [Acknowledging alternative explanations/viewpoints](#)

How well does the student acknowledge additional perspectives and consider other options, including:

- Recognizing that the problem is complex with no clear answer;
- Proposing other options and weighing them in the decision;
- Considering all stakeholders or affected parties in suggesting a course of action; and
- Qualifying responses and acknowledging the need for additional information in making an absolute determination?

## [Assessing Writing Skills](#)

Analytic writing skills invariably depend on clarity of thought. Therefore, analytic writing and critical thinking, analytic reasoning, and problem solving are related skills sets. The CLA measures critical thinking performance by asking students to explain in writing their rationale for various conclusions. In doing so, their performance is dependent on both writing and critical thinking as integrated rather than separate skills. We evaluate writing performance using holistic scores that consider several aspects of writing depending on the task. The following are illustrations of the types of questions we address in scoring writing on the various tasks.

### [Presentation](#)

How clear and concise is the argument? Does the student...

- Clearly articulate the argument and the context for that argument;
- Correctly and precisely use evidence to defend the argument; and
- Comprehensibly and coherently present evidence?

### [Development](#)

How effective is the structure? Does the student...

- Logically and cohesively organize the argument;
- Avoid extraneous elements in the argument's development; and
- Present evidence in an order that contributes to a persuasive and coherent argument?

### [Persuasiveness](#)

How well does the student defend the argument? Does the student...

- Effectively present evidence in support of the argument;
- Draw thoroughly and extensively from the available range of evidence;
- Analyze the evidence in addition to simply presenting it; and
- Consider counterarguments and address weaknesses in his/her own argument?

[Back to contents](#)

## Mechanics

What is the quality of the student's writing?

- Is vocabulary and punctuation used correctly;
- Is the student's understanding of grammar strong;
- Is the sentence structure basic, or more complex and creative;
- Does the student use proper transitions; and
- Are the paragraphs structured logically and effectively?

## Interest

How well does the student maintain the reader's interest?

- Does the student use creative and engaging examples or descriptions;
- Does the structure, syntax and organization add to the interest of their writing;
- Does the student use colorful but relevant metaphors, similes, etc.;
- Does the writing engage the reader; and
- Does the writing leave the reader thinking?

## [Score Sheet](#)

There are two types of items that appear on a CLA score sheet: analytic and holistic. Analytic scoring items are particular to each prompt and holistic items refer to general dimensions, such as evaluation of evidence, drawing conclusions, acknowledging alternative explanations and viewpoints, and overall writing. We compute raw scores for each task by adding up all points on all items (i.e., calculating a unit-weighted sum).

Performance Task scoring is tailored to each specific prompt and includes a combination of both holistic and analytic scoring items. Though there are many types of analytic items on the Performance Task score sheets, the most common represent a list of the possible pieces of information a student could or should raise in their response. These cover the information presented in the Performance Task documents as well as information that can be deduced from comparing information across documents. The analytic items are generally given a score of 0 if the student did not use the information in their response, or 1 if they did. The number of analytic items varies by prompt.

Performance Task holistic items are scored on four or seven-point scales (i.e., 1-4 or 1-7). There are multiple holistic items per Performance Task that require graders to provide an evaluation of different aspects of critical thinking and reasoning in the student responses. These holistic items include areas such as the student's use of the most relevant information in the Performance Task, their recognition of strengths and weaknesses of various pieces of information, overall critical thinking, and overall writing.

Critique-an-Argument score sheets also include a combination of analytic and holistic scores. Critique-an-Argument analytic items are a list of possible critiques of the argument presented in the prompt. In addition, a few holistic items are used to rate the overall quality, critical thinking and writing over the entire response.

Make-an-Argument score sheets contain only holistic items scored on four or seven-point scales (i.e., 1-4 or 1-7). The holistic items include ratings for various aspects of writing (e.g., organization, mechanics, etc.) and critical thinking (e.g., reasoning and logic, sophistication and depth of treatment of the issues raised in the prompt) as well as two overall assessments of writing and critical thinking.

For all task types, blank responses or responses that are entirely unrelated to the task (e.g., writing about what they had for breakfast) are assigned a 0 and are flagged for removal from the school-level results.

[Back to contents](#)

## [Scoring Procedure](#)

During the 2007-2008 CLA administration, all scoring was conducted by trained scorers. Starting in fall 2008, a combination of machine and human scoring is being used.

All scorer candidates undergo rigorous training in order to become certified CLA scorers. Training includes an orientation to the prompt and score sheet, instruction on how to evaluate the scoring items, repeated practice grading a wide range of student responses, and extensive feedback and discussion after scoring each response. After participating in training, scorers complete a reliability check where they score the same set of student responses. Scorers with low agreement or reliability (determined by comparisons of raw score means, standard deviations and correlations among the scorers) are either further coached or removed from scoring.

# PERFORMANCE TASK: CRIME REDUCTION

In this section, we present you with excerpts from a retired CLA Performance Task called “Crime Reduction” as follows:

- Introduction
- A “Document Library” consisting of the Instructions and seven primary source documents
- Question #1 (the first out of a total of three Crime Reduction questions)

Below is a screen shot taken of the beginning of the Crime Reduction task; this is how the students would have seen it on-screen:

The screenshot shows the beginning of the Crime Reduction task. At the top, a dark blue header bar contains the text "Collegiate Learning Assessment (Task 1)" and "1 of 4 1 hr 28 min 9 sec". To the right of the header is a small image of a building entrance. Below the header, the main content area is split into two columns. The left column has a heading "Introduction" and contains three paragraphs of text. The right column has a heading "Document Library Contents" and a list of eight documents. At the bottom of the screen, there is a dark blue footer bar with a "Help" icon on the left and a "Next" icon on the right.

Collegiate Learning Assessment (Task 1)  
1 of 4 1 hr 28 min 9 sec

### Introduction

Please read the instructions in Document 1 located in the Document Library (see right side of screen). Your answers to the questions that follow should describe all the details necessary to support your position. Your answers will be judged not only on the accuracy of the information you provide, but also on how clearly the ideas are presented, how effectively the ideas are organized, and how thoroughly the information is covered.

While your personal values and experiences are important, please answer all the questions solely on the basis of the information above and in the Document Library.

Write your answers in the box below each question. You can write as much as you wish; you are not limited by the size of the box on the screen.

Select document: Document Library Contents

© 2007 CAE. All rights reserved.

### Document Library Contents

- Document 1 Instructions
- Document 2 Investigator's memo
- Document 3 Newspaper Story
- Document 4 Police Tables
- Document 5 Report on XYZ
- Document 6 Crime Statistics
- Document 7 Dr. Eager's Chart
- Document 8 Research Abstracts

Help Next

We then go in-depth with the first of the three Crime Reduction questions, explaining the scoring items associated with the first question and providing you with three actual student responses to the question accompanied by a brief explanation of what characterizes one response as a “high” response, one as a “moderate” response, and one as a “low” response.

[Back to contents](#)

# PERFORMANCE TASK: CRIME REDUCTION

## [Introduction](#)

Please read the instructions in Document 1 located in the Document Library (see right side of the screen). Your answers to the questions that follow should describe all the details necessary to support your position. Your answers will be judged not only on the accuracy of the information you provide, but also on how clearly the ideas are presented, how effectively the ideas are organized, and how thoroughly the information is covered.

While your personal values and experiences are important, please answer all the questions solely on the basis of the information above and in the Document Library.

Write your answers in the box below each question. You can write as much as you wish; you are not limited by the size of the box on the screen.

## [Document Library](#)

*Here, we provide brief descriptions (i.e., not the full text) of each of the documents that students needed to examine in order to answer all three of the Crime Reduction questions.*

### [Document 1: Instructions](#)

Pat Stone is running for reelection as mayor of Jefferson, a city in the state of Columbia. Mayor Stone's opponent in this contest is Dr. Jamie Eager. Dr. Eager is a member of the Jefferson City Council. You are a consultant to Mayor Stone.

Dr. Eager made the following three arguments during a recent TV interview: First, Mayor Stone's proposal for reducing crime by increasing the number of police officers is a bad idea. Dr. Eager said "it will only lead to more crime." Dr. Eager supported this argument with a chart that shows that counties with a relatively large number of police officers per resident tend to have **more** crime than those with fewer officers per resident.

Second, Dr. Eager said "we should take the money that would have gone to hiring more police officers and spend it on the XYZ drug treatment program." Dr. Eager supported this argument by referring to a news release by the Washington Institute for Social Research that describes the effectiveness of the XYZ drug treatment program. Dr. Eager also said there were other scientific studies that showed the XYZ program was effective. ([continued on next page](#))

[Back to contents](#)

## Document 1: Instructions (continued)

Third, Dr. Eager said that because of the strong correlation between drug use and crime in Jefferson, reducing the number of addicts would lower the city's crime rate. To support this argument, Dr. Eager showed a chart that compared the percentage of drug addicts in a Jefferson zip code area to the number of crimes committed in that area. Dr. Eager based this chart on crime and community data tables that were provided by the Jefferson Police Department.

Mayor Stone has asked you to prepare a memo that analyzes the strengths and limitations of each of Dr. Eager's three main points, including any holes in those arguments. **Your memo also should contain your conclusions about each of Dr. Eager's three points, explain the reasons for your conclusions, and justify those conclusions by referring to the specific documents, data, and statements on which your conclusions are based.**

## Document 2: Investigator's Memo

This is a memorandum written by a private investigator hired by Mayor Pat Stone to look into any possible connections between Dr. Eager and the XYZ drug treatment program.

## Document 3: Newspaper Story

This is an article in the local paper, Jefferson Daily Press, entitled, "Smart-Shop Robbery Suspect Caught: Drug-Related Crime on the Rise in Jefferson." The article describes a robbery that occurred at a Smart-Shop store where the suspect was arrested within hours of it being reported by the owner. According to the article, the suspect appeared to be "high on drugs he had purchased with some of the money taken from the store."

## Document 4: Police Tables

Two tables are presented from the Jefferson Police Department. They provide data for the city's five zip code areas. Table 1 presents crime statistics: percentage of adults who are drug users; number of robberies and burglaries; number of residents; and number of robberies and burglaries per 1,000 residents. One sees that as the percentage of drug users increases, the number of robberies and burglaries increases; thus it appears that Dr. Eager may be correct. However, if you look at the percentage of drug users against the number of robberies and burglaries per 1,000 residents, you see that there is no relationship.

Table 2 presents demographic characteristics: percentage of offenders living in Jefferson who are drug users; and percentage of residents who are college graduates.

[Back to contents](#)

## Document 5: Report on XYZ

This is a research brief from the Washington Institute for Social Research titled, “XYZ drug treatment works in Clarendon.” It highlights the effectiveness of the XYZ drug treatment in the small city of Clarendon.

## Document 6: Crime Statistics

This figure comes from the State of Columbia’s Department of Public Safety. It looks at crime statistics by county for the year 2000. There are 53 counties in Columbia. The figure plots the relationship between the number of police officers per 1,000 residents in a county (y-axis) against the number of robberies and burglaries per 1,000 residents (x-axis). Overall, there is a positive relationship.

## Document 7: Dr. Eager’s Chart

This is the chart that Dr. Eager used during the TV interview to show the relationship between the number of crimes committed and drug use in Jefferson. The chart is based on data that were provided to Dr. Eager by the Jefferson City Policy Department. Specifically, the chart was created from the data in Table 1 of Document 4.

## Document 8: Research Abstracts

This document contains three research abstracts gathered from an online search where the search terms are: drug prevention, success, XYZ Drug Treatment Program. After reading the three research abstracts, students might point out specific strengths and weaknesses (i.e., in research design) in each of the three studies.

This section provides an in-depth look at Question 1 of Crime Reduction. Here, we provide you with actual student responses to Question 1 from students who took the Crime Reduction Performance Task online as part of the CLA. These student responses represent different levels of performance (high, moderate, and low) as well as the characteristics of these responses that qualify them for a particular level. We did not modify the student responses for content or length, nor did we make edits for spelling or grammar.

## [Question 1](#)

Mayor Stone has asked you to evaluate each of Dr. Eager’s three main points. The Document Library on the right side of the screen contains materials that you should use in preparing your analysis of Dr. Eager’s points. Please take a few minutes now to skim through these documents.

Document 6 contains the chart Dr. Eager used to support the claim that Mayor Stone’s proposal for reducing crime “will only lead to more crime.” Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Use the box below to explain why you reached this conclusion. In other words, why do you believe Dr. Eager’s statement regarding this matter does or does not make sense? Be specific as to the strengths and limitations of Dr. Eager’s position on this matter and the information in the documents (and any other factors you considered) that led you to this conclusion.

## [Central Aim of the Question](#)

The question is trying to ascertain whether the student agrees or disagrees with Dr. Eager’s statement that hiring police will only lead to more crime. To be correct, the student should disagree with Dr. Eager on this point. Why? The main concept here is correlation versus causation. Can the student distinguish between the two concepts? The contention that communities with more police have more crime is specious. It implies that police cause crime. It is more plausible that communities with more crime have hired more police to deal with the problem. You cannot draw anything conclusive from Dr. Eager’s chart (Document 6); you can not know anything with certainty simply based on the chart. A student might argue that the points on the plot are too scattered to infer any linear relationship – this is incorrect.

## [Analytic Scoring Items for Question 1](#)

Below are the four analytic scoring items for Question #1 from the Crime Reduction score sheet. These items are accompanied by explanations, also below.

1. Agrees with Eager or asserts that more police cause more crime  YES  NO
2. Suggests that more crime **might** necessitate more police  YES  NO
3. Says correlation does not mean cause (or causality could go either way)  YES  NO
4. Says a third variable could cause both crime and police to be correlated  YES  NO

### Item 1

The scorer checks this item if the student agrees with Dr. Eager on this specific point (the relationship between crime and police). If the student agrees with Dr. Eager on this point, this is **incorrect**. This should raise a red flag as it indicates that perhaps the student does not correctly understand correlation and causation.

### Item 2

The scorer checks this item if the student does not agree with Dr. Eager because more crime might necessitate more police. “Might” is a key word here; the student should express uncertainty rather than a certainty in the explanation.

- Some strong responses: “a more likely explanation might be” or “this could be the cause”
- Some weak responses (these are ones stated with certainty): “obviously this is what happened” or “clearly”

### Item 3

The student must capture the intent, even if the exact words “correlation does not mean causation” are not used. It is important to emphasize intent because students may not always use the correct technical terminology of the concept that they are trying to express (such as “correlation”), but they can express this concept adequately.

- Example of intent expressed: “Two things might go together, but this one doesn’t lead to the other”

### Item 4

This item recognizes the instance where the student proposes a third variable not covered by the documents. It allows him/her to entertain different, feasible possibilities. The third variable suggestion must make sense. At the most basic level, the student might just reference the possibility of a third variable. At an even higher level, the student might provide an explanation for including this third variable. [NOTE: It’s noteworthy if your student even recognizes a third variable. It happens infrequently.] It’s important to distinguish between a third variable that might explain the cause for both crime and police to be correlated versus an explanation that describes why more police might cause more crime or more crime might cause more police.

- An example of a third variable: Wealthy communities can afford to hire more police and also attract more crime

[Back to contents](#)

## [High Quality Response and Key Characteristics](#)

*I do not agree with Dr. Eager's claim that Mayor Stone's proposal for reducing crime "will only lead to more crime." His only support for the claim hinges on the document 6 chart that shows a weak correlation between the number of police officers per 1000 residents and the number of robberies and burglaries per 1000 residents. However, Dr. Eager is mistaking correlation for causation and failing to understand the alternate explanations for such a correlation. More than likely higher volumes of robberies and burglaries per 1000 residents are occurring in concentrated urban areas or poorer neighborhoods with crime problems. As a result more officers will naturally be allocated to these areas rather than to other areas with low crime rates. However, that does not mean that the increase in police officers in these areas is causing the extra crime. By only observing correlation and not examining the underlying circumstances, Dr. Eager is being shortsighted in his analysis. If anything the problem is that even though more police officers have been allocated to high crime areas, these problem areas still simply do not have enough police personnel to adequately deal with the problems. As such Mayor Stone's proposal possesses merit that Dr. Eager's claims fail to observe.*

## Characteristics of this high quality response:

- Evaluates the evidence
- Provides analysis and synthesis of the evidence (e.g., understands correlation versus causation and suggests an alternative reason for the relationship between crime and police officers)
- Draws appropriate conclusions (e.g., there is not necessarily a causal relationship between the variables displayed on the chart)
- Writes with clear organization and the response is easy to follow
- Shows strong command of writing mechanics

## Moderate Quality Response and Characteristics

*While it seems strange to say that a larger police presence will in fact lead to higher crime. In the case of Dr. Eager's argument, there in fact may be a valid point in that a higher police presence may address short term issues such as arresting the criminal who commits a robbery or burglary but may not take care of the long-term problem as to why that person commits that crime in the first place. In the case of document 6 which is the crime rates and police officers chart. There does appear to be a correlation between the number of police officers and the number of crimes committed. However, this chart can be misleading as it doesn't take into account other factors that would be important to consider in an issue such as this one. For example, the chart doesn't take into account where these crimes are being committed and what the police presence is in those areas. It could be argued that the higher police presence is in response to a rise in crime in a particular area. We do not have any idea how long the crimes have been going on nor see the effect of having more police officers in one area does to that area's crime rate. The graph also doesn't take into account that higher population areas would have higher a higher number of police officers and a higher crime rate. This graph combines all the counties and creates this one standard in which areas with a small number of police officers, which probably would have lower crime rates along with lower populations are made to appear that fewer police officers leads to fewer crimes. This graphs takes these numbers out of context and makes an extremely flawed argument that if taken into practice would lead to extremely detrimental results. That's why Dr. Eager's statement about more police leading to more crime is flawed and it presents an opportunity for the mayor to counter the Doctor's argument.*

## Characteristics of this moderate quality response:

- Evaluates the evidence
- Provides analysis and synthesis of the evidence (e.g., understands correlation versus causation and suggests other possible factors leading to the relationship, such as population or the possibility that the higher police presence is in response to a rise in crime in a particular area)
- Shows moderate command of writing mechanics (e.g., fragments)

## [Low Quality Response and Characteristics](#)

*I understand Dr. Eager's statement about crime. It is a valid statement that makes sense. Jefferson does appear to have a high percentage of crime rates caused by drug addicts. A successful drug treatment program would lower the crime rate, however, I believe that crime will always be out there. No matter what a city, state or country does, crime will always exist. Drugs and crime are always a bad combination. In this case, the charts report the greater the population using drugs, crime was on the rise. There are many great programs out there that will treat drug abuse; hence, a cut in crime rates. When they are appropriately funded they are statistically proven to work. The university research abstracts conclude that 27% of people dropped out of the XYZ Drug Treatment plan, whereas 30% dropped out from the I Can plan. There were fewer arrests for those that completed the XYZ plan.*

### Characteristics of this low quality response:

- Accepts the document as it is (without critique) and does not interpret the information correctly (e.g., agrees with Dr. Eager, thus confusing correlation with causation)
- Interjects response with personal opinion, often without supporting evidence
- Interjects response with other information, though it is unclear why this information is presented (It should be noted that in the subsequent responses to the two other questions in this task, the student continues to use not always the most relevant or significant document to support statements)

### Other characteristics of low quality responses:

- Blank, extremely brief (i.e., only a few words or one sentence), unintelligible, or completely off topic answers.

In this section, we present you with a Make-an-Argument prompt called “Government Funding,” sample responses at different levels of performance (high, moderate, and low), and characteristics of responses at each of those levels.

## [Introduction](#)

Students are provided with the following instructions when taking Make-an-Argument:

Collegiate Learning Assessment (Task 1)



## Analytic Writing Task 1

**Instructions:** You will have 45 minutes to plan and write an argument on the topic on the next screen. You should take a position to support or oppose the statement. Use examples taken from your reading, coursework, or personal experience to support your position.

Your essay will be evaluated on how well you do the following:

1. State your position
2. Organize, develop, and express your ideas
3. Support your ideas with relevant reasons and/or examples
4. Control the elements of standard written English

Before you begin writing, you may want to take a few minutes to decide on a position and to plan a response. Be sure to develop your ideas fully and organize them coherently, but leave time to reread what you have written and make any revisions that you think are necessary.



Help



Next

[Back to contents](#)

## [Prompt](#)

*Government funding would be better spent on preventing crime than in dealing with criminals after the fact.*

## [Scoring Criteria](#)

In addition to consideration of the scoring criteria outlined earlier in this document, each Make-an-Argument response is assessed specifically on general logic, argumentation, and analytic writing skills:

- Clarifying a position and supporting it with evidence
- Considering alternative viewpoints or counter points to their argument
- Developing logical, persuasive argument
- Depth and complexity of thinking about the issues raised in the prompt
- Level and sophistication of vocabulary, sentence structure, and grammar
- Organization and flow of information presented
- Generation of reader interest, provocation of thought
- Use of examples

Students can argue either side of the argument. Students can also argue that both have merit or neither has merit. No penalty is given for the perspective they take; however, they are expected to take a clear position on the issues in the prompt and support it.

## [High Quality Response and Key Characteristics](#)

*Government imposes order upon its citizens to pursue generally agreed-upon goals in society. An important function of American government, for example, is to protect the “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” of its citizens, a premise upon which the U.S. was founded more than two centuries ago. Guaranteeing this “inalienable right” through government action is easier said than done. In general, government does so by collecting taxes, enacting laws, and enforcing laws consistent with goals. Violating these laws, by definition, are crimes and the people who commit crimes are criminals. But the meaning of laws and the causes of crime are complicated. In all, there is no simple formula for investing taxpayer dollars and the statement oversimplifies the challenge of dealing with crime. While investing public dollars in crime prevention may have certain advantages, it is not necessarily “better spent” than “dealing with criminals after the fact.”*

[Back to contents](#)

# MAKE-AN-ARGUMENT: GOVERNMENT FUNDING

*Laws are reflections of moral beliefs of society, that is, what we collectively believe to be right or wrong. These beliefs often change over time, and even by communities within broader society. Furthermore not all laws, or crimes, receive the same levels of enforcement. For example, while we might universally agree that certain violent acts (e.g., murder, rape, armed robbery) are indeed crimes that ought to be prevented at high dollar cost, we might not agree that others (e.g., underage drinking, jaywalking) deserve the same attention. And certain laws which may have been important at the time or in the jurisdiction where they were written, they may no longer be relevant, although they may remain on the books. Given different interpretations, severity and changing nature of crime, it might be quite difficult (and costly) to create a program that effectively prevents crime in all its variety. Doing so would run the risk of addressing those crimes that either do not pose significant threat to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” or, in the future, are no longer crimes at all. By contrast, dealing with criminals after the fact has the advantage of focusing resources on those who have indeed violated existing laws in society, in particular those laws society has chosen to enforce. This approach also allows society to reconsider laws for relevance in present-day society (i.e., through the courts) as violations occur, so that criminal behavior may be redefined as concepts of morality may change.*

*Furthermore, preventing crime requires that we understand why crimes occur, so that we may know how to intervene. But crime is complex, stemming from many, many conditions pertaining to society and its members. These factors may divide along lines of the classic debate in biology over “nature vs. nurture” as determinants of behavior. Interpreting crime in this way, we might ask: Are criminals the result of the influence of their environment? Or are criminals born to commit crimes? If criminals are products of their environment, then crime prevention programs should address root causes of crime in society. But what are these root causes, and can they be disentangled from a combination of other factors? Are all people susceptible to the same causes, or does a crime prevention program need to accommodate all individual differences so that none will become criminals? Investing in a comprehensive crime prevention program that addresses all causes and all individuals would appear to be a costly proposition. It is difficult to imagine a program that could effectively do so, at any cost. Furthermore, addressing a root cause of crime would likely trigger a series of other causes that would need to be addressed. If, for example, robbery is related to high incidence of poverty and drug abuse, then crime prevention requires effective programs to address problems of poverty and substance abuse. But these, too, are complex problems related to issues of education, discrimination, mental health, and so forth. Where would the crime prevention program (and government investment) stop? By contrast, according to the “nature” argument, criminals are social deviants from birth. Addressing crime becomes a simple matter of identifying these individuals and removing them from society according to the crimes they commit, without any need to address social or environmental concerns. So long as the number of criminals is few, the cost of separating these individuals from society (e.g., by sending them to prison) will also be relatively small, and government funding might be “better spent” on this approach.*

[Back to contents](#)

*But my understanding is that the “nature vs. nurture” argument rages on, leading me to believe that neither determines an individual’s behavior by itself. Sending individuals to prison, because they were born criminals, assumes that these people cannot become productive members of society. It denies these individuals their own “inalienable right,” a reason many have come to the America in the first place. Whether or not this is the case, keeping these individuals imprisoned assumes further that laws, and therefore the definition of crime, never changes. Unjust imprisonment in the name of dealing with criminals can never be government funding “better spent” in the United States.*

*Neither investment in crime prevention nor investment in dealing with criminals by themselves can easily address the problem of crime in our society. Instead, some combination, along with investments in other societal improvements will be required to address problems of crime. More generally, how government funding should be spent to address the complex challenge of protecting citizen’s rights to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” is best determined by the continued interaction of lawmakers, law enforcement officials, the courts, and the citizenry, just as it has for more than 200 years.*

## Characteristics of this high quality response:

- Clearly elucidated thesis
- Well-organized
- Sophisticated use of vocabulary and mechanics
- Sophisticated, in-depth treatment of the issues
  - Acknowledges and discusses issues on both sides of the prompt
  - Raises uncommon points (e.g., the changing conception of crime)
  - Clarifies the different meanings and purposes of key terms (e.g., government, crime, prevention)
  - Supports points with helpful examples
  - Applies concepts from their education (e.g., nature vs. nurture, laws are reflections of societal moral beliefs)
  - Considers the consequences of their suggestions
  - Logically developed; each idea builds upon the last

## Moderate Quality Response and Key Characteristics

*Government funding would be better spent on dealing with criminals after the fact as opposed to investing in programs intending to prevent crime. I say this because there will always be those who can outsmart the government. Criminals will always find new opportunities and means to commit criminal acts, even though the government will win occasional battles in the war on crime,.*

*Technology plays a central role in this ongoing battle between government and criminals. New weapons and tools in particular, increase the capabilities of those who commit crimes. Often these weapons and tools are more readily available to criminals than to the crime fighters! For example, criminals armed with so-called “assault rifles” enjoy a distinct advantage over cops who are not allowed to carry them. In some ways, our system of government hinders our ability to defend our society against clever and well-equipped criminals. While our system does change over time—police are now allowed to carry more powerful weapons in some locales—change occurs slowly.*

*Government can never get far enough ahead of criminals to anticipate criminal behavior and prevent crime because criminals will also have better weapons than crimefighters, Thus investing in crime prevention cannot be the best use of government funding. Instead, government funding should be spent on dealing with criminals after the fact.*

## Characteristics of this moderate quality response:

- Clear but limited thesis that focuses on a narrow aspect of crime (technology and weapons of criminals)
- Sentence structure is unvarying (subject, verb, object)
- Some arguments are unclear, or not clearly related to thesis. For example:
  - In paragraph 3, how do criminals having better weapons make it hard for police to anticipate them or their crimes?
  - Argument about criminals and technology is not clearly related to how funding should be spent. It is not clear whether or not the writer is suggesting that if police are equipped with better weapons, they will be better able to defend society from criminals
- Does not attempt to counter potential objections to the argument (e.g., the greater resources of the police force relative to a single individual criminal)

## [Low Quality Response and Key Characteristics](#)

*Crime is a huge problem around the globe, and mostly in America. Crime effects our everyday lives more than we even know and is the black hole into which billions and billions of dollars are sunken into each year on security products for people, and legal and justice cost.*

*About security products, we buy expensive alarm systems for our homes, bars for our windows, locks for our doors. We hire security guards to patrol our neighborhoods. If that was not enough, we store our valuables in banks and rent safety deposit boxes! And when we put “decorative” bars on our windows and fences around our yards, nobody will want to buy a home that needs so much security!*

*We carry mace in our purses, whistles on our key rings, we plan our schedules and routes to work to avoid certain neighborhoods. We get escorts to our cars in parking lots after dark. All of this costs money. And the only ones benefiting from all of this are the manufacturers of the products, the security guards and the lawyers.*

*Our great country deals with this dilemma in almost backwards fashion. The government could easily use these billions and billions of dollars spent on people stealing bread for there family to eat, to just provide bread for the families so they won’t have to steal. Also, the funds could be used to develop programs in which people are trained to get jobs. Instead of force people into crime and forget about them, the U.S. government should uplift its own people into something greater, so that allot of these issues and crimes would cease to exist.*

## Characteristics of this low quality response exemplified in this sample:

- Thesis is undeveloped
- Writing is adequate, but contains awkward constructions and mistakes in vocabulary and tense
- Does not address the main issues in the prompt
  - Argument is largely about our fear of crime
  - Never takes or supports a position about prevention vs. dealing with criminals
- Uses some good examples (e.g., bars on our windows), but largely to support our fear of crime
- Critical thinking is poor
  - Unclear why manufacturers, guards, and lawyers are the only ones to benefit from security devices
  - Does not try to counter the position that security devices can be effective in crime reduction
  - Opening contention is hyperbolic (billions and billions of dollars spent on security devices)

In this section, we present you with a Critique-an-Argument prompt called “Weddings,” sample responses at different levels of performance (high, moderate, and low), and characteristics of responses at each of those levels.

## [Introduction](#)

Students are provided with the following instructions when taking Critique-an-Argument.

Collegiate Learning Assessment (Task 2)



**Instructions:** There is something wrong with the argument presented below. It is your job to explain what is wrong with the argument.

Discuss:

- Any flaws in the argument
- Any questionable assumptions
- Any missing information
- Any inconsistencies

What we are interested in is your critical thinking skills and how well you write your response. You will have 30 minutes to respond to the argument. You will be judged on how well you do the following:

1. Explain any flaws in the points the author makes
2. Organize, develop, and express your ideas
3. Support your ideas with relevant reasons and/or examples
4. Control the elements of standard written English

**Do not** discuss the structure of the argument. We **do not** want sentences like the following:

"The argument needs a better introductory sentence."

"This argument has some facts that help support its ideas, but the ideas are somewhat unorganized."

"The argument needs more details, more evidence to get its point across."

"The argument does a great job of recommending a solution and a way to fix the problem."

**Your essay should be about what the argument says, not how it's organized.**



Help



Next

[Back to contents](#)

## [Prompt](#)

*The number of marriages that end in divorce keeps growing. A large percentage of them are from June weddings. Because June weddings are so popular, couples end up being engaged for a long time just so that they can get married in the summer months. The number of divorces gets bigger with each passing year, and the latest news is that more than 1 out of 3 marriages will end in divorce. So, if you want a marriage that lasts forever, it is best to do everything you can to prevent getting divorced. Therefore, it is good advice for young couples to have short engagements and choose a month other than June for a wedding.*

## [Scoring Criteria](#)

Each Critique-an-Argument response is assessed on the holistic scoring criteria (e.g., critical thinking, writing) as well as recognition and explanation of specific logical flaws in the argument. The logical flaws are prompt-specific; however, they cover a variety of common critical thinking concepts. For this prompt, some examples of logical flaws include:

- Number and proportion are not the same thing
  - The population and hence the number of weddings are growing, so the increase in the number of divorces may simply reflect an increase in population, and nothing more
  - A more appropriate measure is the proportion of marriages that end in divorce now compared to the past, or the proportion of June weddings ending in divorce compared to the proportions of weddings in other months that end in divorce
- Correlation is not causation
  - Getting married in June may not cause people to get divorced
  - June weddings may not cause long engagements
  - Long engagements may not cause divorce, even if June weddings do cause divorce

## [High Quality Response and Characteristics](#)

*There are several problems with this author's argument for avoiding divorce by shortening engagements and avoiding June weddings. One problem is that just because the number of divorces is going up, divorces are not necessarily a bigger problem now than they were last year or the year before. Every year there are more people in the United States (and on the planet) so that means that each year there are more marriages and probably more divorces. If the number of divorces goes up and the number of people on the planet also goes up by the same amount, then it means that the percentage of divorces would be the same. The writer doesn't tell us whether the percentage of divorces has gone up, down or stayed the same.*

[Back to contents](#)

*The author assumes that because so many divorces are from June weddings, it means that June weddings cause the divorces, or make the divorces more likely. Because we don't know whether the percentage of divorced couples has gone up, down or stayed the same, we don't know if divorces are more, less, or equally likely to happen these days. If more weddings happen in June (because as the writer points out, June weddings are so popular) we might also expect more divorces from weddings in June. If, for example, 80 percent of weddings happen in June, then we might expect 80 percent of divorces to happen to people who were married in June too. If the author is correct that 1 in 3 marriages end in divorce, then it may be the case that 1 in 3 June weddings end in divorce, 1 in 3 February weddings end in divorce, 1 in 3 July weddings end in divorce and so on.*

*Another problem is that the writer assumes that couples end up being engaged for a long time just so that they can get married in the summer months (like June). But couples might be engaged for long periods of time for a lot of other reasons too. For example, couples might stay engaged for a long time so that they can get to know each other better, and not rush into something too quickly. Or maybe they have lengthy engagements because weddings take a long time to plan. Both my parents and grandparents had long engagements and were married in winter, so clearly not all people are having a long engagements just so they can wait to get married in the summer months. Furthermore, my parents and grandparents both married young and are still married, probably because of the greater understanding for one another that they developed during their engagement. If this is true, then the writer's argument that couples should have short engagements to prevent divorces may not be justified.*

*The last problem that I see in the paragraph is that the author argues that avoiding June weddings will prevent divorce. But simply changing a wedding to May or July or any other month should not have any affect on whether or not a couple gets divorced. Divorce is caused by many complex issues in a relationship including communication, love, caring, respect, supportiveness, compromise, compatibility, and above all hard work at maintaining the relationship. If a couple wants to try to prevent getting divorced, they should work on these things, not simply avoiding a June wedding as the author suggests. My brother is divorced. Yes, he was married in June. But in my opinion the date of their wedding was the least of their problems.*

## Characteristics of this high quality response:

- Information is well organized. The reader knows exactly which part of the prompt is being critiqued at every point in the response
- Uses complex sentence structure and varied vocabulary
- Respectful and appropriate tone
- Uses examples (e.g., reasoned hypothetical examples and common knowledge) to support and illustrate valid points
- Identifies numerous flaws (complex and subtle)
- Explanation/justification: The response not only mentions numerous flaws throughout the argument, but also explains the flaws clearly, completely, and convincingly for the reader
- Demonstrates solid understanding of several important critical thinking concepts. For example:
  - The difference between interpreting proportions versus just raw numbers in statistics and how doing so can lead to different conclusions
  - Correlation is not causation

## Moderate Quality Response and Characteristics

*At first glance the paragraph that couples should avoid June marriages sounds well grounded in factual evidence. However, there is no information provided for the total number of weddings in each month. Minus the statement that June weddings are “popular” how can you tell if those June weddings are more common than May weddings? Or August weddings? The article implies that more weddings in June end up in divorce. Well, if there are twice as many June weddings, which seems to be supported by that June is the most desirable month, then one can reasonably assume that there will be twice as many June weddings that end in divorce as well. We cannot conclude, from the data or arguments that being married in June ends up in divorce any more than being married in other months.*

*The argument for the shortening of engagements is also flawed. Short engagements likely mean less time to think about the decision of marriage. How can this be a good thing when ultimately the argument is for avoiding divorce? The paragraph seems to say that at people must avoid June weddings and that somehow length of engagement matters too. What if the couple gets engaged in April? Should they hasten their plans and get married in May to avoid the dreaded June? The paragraph suggests that doing so is better than waiting until July, or longer. What is the right amount of time to be engaged in order to avoid divorce? What is the best month to get married? Given differences among people, and therefore couples, and a lot of other factors, I think it depends on many things. But we can’t conclude from the information or argument given that the answer is brief engagement leading to a wedding in a month other than June.*

[Back to contents](#)

## Characteristics of this moderate quality response:

- Writing is clear and somewhat organized
- Makes some substantive points
  - Divorce rates between years and months cannot be compared without knowing the total number of weddings per month
  - Notes the logical flaw with having brief engagement periods, and highlights with an extreme example
- Barely touches on other flaws
- Mentions the complexity of marriage and how what is right for one couple may not be right for another couple. Does not develop this point at all
- Points are partially, but not fully developed. The use of rhetorical questions and hypothetical examples is somewhat effective at illustrating their point; however, the rhetorical questioning is overused. The response would benefit from use of more varied examples to support points, and greater development of points

## Low Quality Response and Characteristics

*MY BROTHER GOT MARRIED LAST JUNE. I WAS THE BEST MAN, BUT I DON'T KNOW WHETHER THEY SHOULD HAVE A JUNE WEDDING AGAIN OR NOT. WE HAD A GREAT PARTY AFTERWERD, SO IT WAS STILL A LOT OF FUN DANCING, BUT I AGREE THAT JUNE WEDDINGS AREN'T A GOOD IDEA. OTHER MONTHS THAT ARE COOLER WOULD BE BETTER FOR DANCING. I THINK THAT MY BROTHER AND HIS WIFE HAVE A GOOD MARRIAGE, BUT THEY HAVE ONLY BEEN GOING OUT FOR A YEAR.*

## Characteristics of this low quality response:

- Lack of content: No critical evaluation of the logical argument presented. Appears to not fully understand how to critically evaluate an argument
- Writing is simple: short sentences, basic vocabulary

## Other characteristics of low quality responses:

- Misses the purpose of the critique (e.g., “this paragraph needs a comma after the third word in the first sentence”)
- Attitude/tone of writing: emotional, flippant and insulting
- Some statements are inaccurate
- Poor command of written English
  - Lengthy run-on sentences
  - Statements are poorly structured

[Back to contents](#)

## [An opportunity to learn more about authentic assessment](#)

Nationwide there has been renewed attention on ensuring that college graduates have the necessary critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving, and written communication skills necessary for personal and professional success in the 21st century. The CLA in the Classroom Academy – which is a component of the national CLA assessment program – provides faculty development opportunities for creating curricular tools that can be used to help students develop these key higher order skills.

Through presentations, hands-on individual and group work, and discussions during the two-day workshop, you will:

- Gain a deeper understanding of authentic assessment tools and rubric-based assessment as they relate to teaching and learning
- Become certified to administer a disclosed CLA Performance Task to diagnose your own students' higher order skill levels
- Work in groups to create a complete Performance Task that can be used in a course to help students develop and practice their thinking, reasoning and problem-solving skills
- Have opportunities to interact with faculty and teaching and learning staff from other institutions, disciplines and departments
- Share strategies to improve pedagogical practices as they relate to higher-order skill development

## [Learn more about CLA in the Classroom](#)

To learn more about CLA in the Classroom, please visit our website at <http://www.claintheclassroom.org> or email [classroom@cae.org](mailto:classroom@cae.org).