



CLA STUDENT GUIDE

What is the CLA?

The Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) is an open-ended assessment that provides a measure of an institution's contribution to the development of critical thinking and writing skills of its students.

Unlike many of the exams you may be familiar with, the CLA reports the results at the school level, rather than at the student level. And while the CLA allows schools to benchmark how much progress their students have made relative to the progress of similar students at other colleges, it is not designed to rank institutions, nor is it designed to rank students. The principal goal of the CLA is to assist faculty and administrators in improving teaching and learning.

Why do schools use the CLA?

Schools participate in the CLA to estimate how, and by how much, they contribute to your development of higher-order skills. Collecting this information is one step in the process of improving teaching and learning.

There are many variables that schools may use when attempting to measure their "quality of education." Some of these variables include student-to-teacher ratios, endowment size, the number of faculty with doctoral degrees, etc.

While this information is certainly helpful, it doesn't provide a direct measure of student learning. The CLA, on the other hand, focuses directly on the quality of education that is being provided to you and your peers by estimating student learning outcomes.





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Why is your participation important to your school?

An assessment program like the CLA requires the cooperation of many members of your institution, including administrators, faculty, and students.

The students who participate in the CLA contribute to the results and data that inform your institution about its students' learning. The more students that participate in the assessment, the more confidence an institution can have in its results.

Not only does your participation in the CLA help to demonstrate your school's contribution to your learning, but by attempting to do your best on the CLA, you are also helping your school grow and improve the education it provides to you and your peers.

Assessment Overview

There are two task types in the CLA: the **Performance Task** and the **Analytic Writing Task**. Most students will take one task or the other, not both. The Analytic Writing Task includes a pair of prompts called Make-an-Argument and Critique-an-Argument.

All CLA tasks are administered online and contain open-ended prompts that require written responses. There are no multiple-choice questions.

The two task types are randomly distributed to students upon entering the testing environment through the online Student Interface.

The CLA tasks are designed to assess students' general higher-order thinking and writing skills regardless of their academic concentrations. These skills are not only necessary for success in college; they are important for success in the workplace and other aspects of life outside the classroom. No prior knowledge of any particular field is necessary in order to perform well on the CLA.





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Performance Tasks

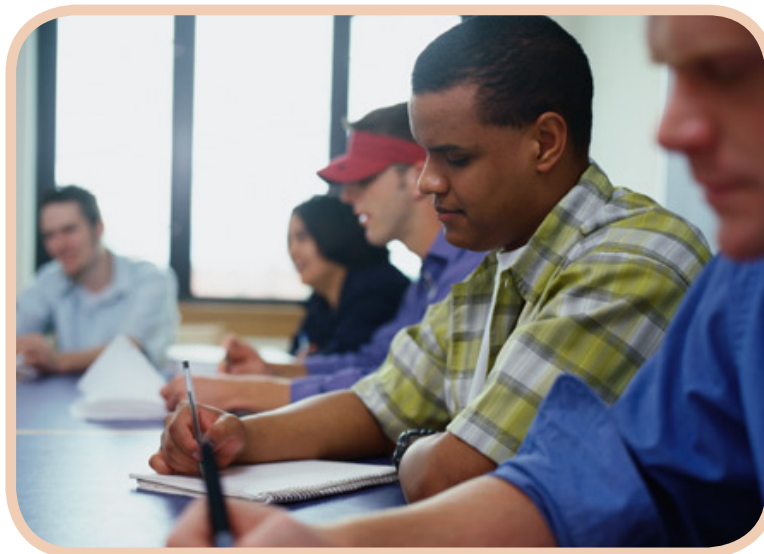
Each Performance Task assesses analytic reasoning and evaluation, problem solving, writing effectiveness and writing mechanics by asking students to answer several open-ended questions about a hypothetical but realistic situation. Students have 90 minutes to complete a Performance Task.

A Performance Task also has its own Document Library that includes a range of information sources, such as letters, memos, photographs, charts, or newspaper articles.

To complete Performance Tasks, you may have to weigh different types of evidence, evaluate the credibility of various documents, spot possible bias, and identify questionable or critical assumptions. It is important to note that there is no single correct answer to a Performance Task.

Characteristics of a High Quality Performance Task Response:

- ☑ Evaluates whether evidence is credible or unreliable
- ☑ Provides analysis and synthesis of the evidence
- ☑ Draws conclusions that follow from the provided evidence
- ☑ Is well-organized and logically developed, with each idea building upon the last
- ☑ Shows strong command of writing mechanics and vocabulary





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Example Performance Task:

SCENARIO:

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. 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 STRIVE 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 STRIVE drug treatment program. Dr. Eager also said there were other scientific studies that showed the STRIVE program was effective.

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.

ROLE:

You are a consultant to Mayor Stone

TASK:

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 LIBRARY:



1. Investigator's Memo | 2. Newspaper Story | 3. Police Tables | 4. Report on STRIVE | 5. Crime Statistics | 6. Dr. Eager's Chart | 7. Research Abstracts



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Analytic Writing Tasks

Each Analytic Writing Task assesses analytic reasoning and evaluation, writing effectiveness and writing mechanics by asking students to respond to two types of essay prompts: **Make-an-Argument** and **Critique-an-Argument**.

A **Make-an-Argument** prompt presents an opinion on an issue and asks you to write, in 45 minutes, a persuasive analytic essay to support a position on the issue.

Characteristics of a High Quality Make-an-Argument Response:

- ☑ Has a clearly developed and explained thesis
- ☑ Includes in-depth treatment of the issues
 - Provides multiple reasons to support your thesis
 - Supports points with helpful examples
 - Considers the consequences of your suggestions
 - Acknowledges and discusses multiple perspectives on the issues
 - Presents counterarguments to opposing perspectives
- ☑ Is well-organized and logically developed, with each idea building upon the last
- ☑ Shows strong command of writing mechanics and vocabulary

Example Task:

The Make-an-Argument prompt presents an opinion on an issue and asks the students to address the issue from any perspective they wish, so long as they provide relevant reasons and examples to explain and support their views on topics such as:

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





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Analytic Writing Tasks

A **Critique-an-Argument** prompt asks you, in 30 minutes, to critique an argument written by someone else; by discussing how well-reasoned you find it to be (rather than simply agreeing or disagreeing with the position presented).

Characteristics of a High Quality Critique-an-Argument Response:

- ☑ Identifies numerous flaws (obvious, subtle, and complex)
- ☑ Explains critiques clearly, completely, and convincingly for the reader using examples, logical argumentation, and common knowledge
- ☑ Is well-organized and logically developed, with each idea building upon the last
- ☑ Shows strong command of writing mechanics and vocabulary

Example Task:

The **Critique-an-Argument** prompt requires students to critique an argument by discussing how well reasoned they find it; they must do so by considering the soundness of the argument's logic (rather than agree or disagree with the position presented). An example prompt is:

The number of marriages that end in separation or divorce is growing steadily. A disproportional number of them are from June weddings. Because June weddings are so culturally desirable, they are often preceded by long engagements as the couples wait until the summer months. The number of divorces increases with each passing year, and the latest statistics indicate that more than 1 out of 3 marriages will end in divorce. With the deck stacked against "forever more" it is best to take every step possible from joining the pool of divorcees. Therefore, it is sage advice to young couples to shorten their engagements and choose a month other than June for a wedding.





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Scholastic Level Exam

The Scholastic Level Exam (SLE) is multiple-choice cognitive ability test created by a separate testing organization (Wonderlic).

Some colleges and universities use the SLE as a proxy for estimating the Entering Academic Ability (EAA) of students who do not have SAT or ACT scores. Each student who takes the CLA must have an SAT, ACT or SLE score to be included in a school's institutional analysis.

All community college students will take the SLE as part of the CLA.

When Can I See My Results?

If you enter a valid email address when completing your online CLA profile, you will receive an email alerting you when your scores are available. If you tested in the fall, you should receive an email in late February; if you tested in the spring, your email will be sent out in August. This email will provide you with instructions on how to retrieve your individual CLA results.

I Would Like to Know More About the CLA

For more information about the structure of CLA tasks please see *Architecture of the CLA*.¹



¹http://www.collegiatelearningassessment.org/files/Architecture_of_the_CLA_Tasks.pdf