

# GWT Component 1A: Response to the Topic

## Analyzing the Prompt

When taking the GWT, your first step should be to understand exactly what the topic is and what specifically you are being asked to do.

Often the writing prompt will start off by providing you with **introductory material**, often a situation to consider and respond to. It is important that you read this background information carefully. Underline important concepts to help you determine the focus for the writing assignment. Here is an example from a practice GWT topic, with underlining added:

GWT Practice Topic #15

### **Will California Have a Common Culture?**

Kevin Starr, writing in the Los Angeles Times, says that according to the projections of Census 2000, the future population of California will be predominantly Latino and Asian. He also argues that for the "Millennial Generation," ethnic identity will be much more complex, with many individuals defining themselves as having mixed or multiple ethnic identifications. He predicts that "since there will be a less powerful white culture to assimilate to, as was the case when whiteness dominated the mainstream, Millennial Generation California will not feel the pressure to assimilate that second-generation Irish, German, Slavic, Italian, Greek and Jewish young Americans experienced in an earlier era. . . . Nearly everyone—and this includes a growing number of whites—will be bi- or even tri-lingual." Starr asks, "Will California have a common culture?"

This is not a trivial question because throughout the world, countries with multi-ethnic populations such as Lebanon, Iraq, Indonesia, India, and others have experienced ethnic conflict, violence, and even warfare.

Following the introductory material will be the actual **writing prompt**, the question(s) you will answer in your essay. Make sure that you understand the question the prompt is asking you to respond to, and be sure that you pay attention to each component of the question. In many cases, as in this one below, there are multiple questions to address. Underline and/or number these questions; this will help you address each component in your essay and organize your essay.

Here is the prompt from the practice GWT topic above, with added underlining and numbering:

In a well-organized essay, answer the following question:

<sup>1</sup> Do you think that different ethnic and cultural groups in Southern California are growing closer together or farther apart? Whatever direction you see the trend

going, <sup>2</sup> what factors lead to increasing social harmony, <sup>3</sup> what factors lead to conflict, and <sup>4</sup> how can we balance them?

*In answering this question you may want to discuss your own experiences at school, in your neighborhood, and at work, as well as what you have seen in the media.*

In analyzing the prompt, pay attention to the **controlling verbs** in your essay prompt. These verbs are the commands that give you directions and help you organize your essay. Some controlling verbs are *analyze, compare, contrast, define, describe, evaluate, explain, illustrate, and state*. The example above doesn't use explicit controlling verbs, but here are two examples that do (with the controlling verbs underlined):

GWT Practice Topic #20

### **Customer Service at Cal Poly Pomona**

*Is there a particular office at Cal Poly Pomona (or another campus you are familiar with) that needs to improve its customer service? Describe this office and the services it provides. Explain the problems you have had and make a recommendation for improvement.*

GWT Practice Topic #23

### **What Makes a Good Teacher?**

*Discuss the qualities that make a good teacher. Illustrate your ideas with examples of good teachers you have known.*

Here are definitions and illustrations of frequently-used controlling verbs:

**Analyze** – Take an idea, event, text or theory and break it down into parts to examine.  
*Analyze Sarah Palin's effect on the GOP presidential campaign of 2004 and how it affected the trajectory of the Republican party after their election loss.*

**Compare/Contrast** – explore similarities and/or differences between 2+ things.  
*Compare the traits of successful college students and successful employees.*

**Define** – Clarify what a word/phrase/concept means.  
*Define language pragmatics and explain how second language learners struggle with it.*

**Describe** – Identify characteristics of something.  
*Describe the plight of American farmers during the Dust Bowl in the 1930s.*

**Evaluate** – Assess the significance or value of something.  
*Evaluate the most recent production of Romeo and Juliet.*

**Explain** – Clarify and interpret the "how and why" of ideas.  
*Explain why many people remain skeptical about global warming.*

**Illustrate** – provide concrete examples to clarify or explain your position.  
*Illustrate the different study habits of successful students.*

**State** – specify and present important points.

*State the effects social media has had on interpersonal relationships.*

Following the directions given in the prompt is an important step toward success on the GWT. An essay that receives the highest score “responds effectively to all aspects of the task,” which means you have clearly understood and appropriately responded to the given topic through effective analysis of the prompt. Inadequate consideration or misinterpretation of the prompt could lead to an essay receiving a much lower score.

### **Finding Ideas to Write About**

Once you understand the topic you are to write about, **pre-writing** or **invention strategies** can help you decide what you think and generate ideas about the topic. Try out the following methods and see which work best for you. (Some methods work better for different types of topics.)

- **Scratch outline**—don’t worry about the rules of formal outlining; just make a rough draft of an outline
- **Clustering**—mapping and connecting ideas on paper
- **List-making**—listing everything you can think of related to the topic
- **Two-column list**—pro/con, before/after, good/bad, etc.

A GWT prompt will often give you clues about invention strategies. For example, in the first GWT practice prompt about “Will California Have a Common Culture?” this sentence follows the actual writing prompt:

In answering this question you may want to discuss your own experiences at school, in your neighborhood, and at work, as well as what you have seen in the media.

This sentence provides you with suggestions for brainstorming. What examples from school, your neighborhood, work, and the media can you think of that relate to the topic of cultural cohesion? You could use **clustering** or **listing** to come up with ideas in each of these categories. Using these hints, when provided, can help you quickly generate ideas to write about.

Here is another prompt with built-in clues that can help you focus your thinking:

*Identify a product that you think is a good value. Identify the product and describe the reasons you think this product is the best value among similar products at this time.*

*In supporting your argument, you may want to develop a list of criteria such as features, capabilities, materials, durability, etc. and show how different products measure up.*

For this prompt, **listing** would be effective for developing your criteria, and making a **two-**

**or three-column list** would help you compare different products.

Take advantage of these suggestions when they are provided as part of the prompt. Use them to decide what you think and to come up with ideas to write about. You don't need to brainstorm each component exhaustively; just spend a few minutes exploring ideas. The resulting lists that are longest and/or strongest point you in the direction you should go in your essay.