

The Upper-Division Writing Exam (UDWE) Information Sheet

To determine whether you should take the exam and to prepare for it, carefully review the following information regarding the Upper-Division Writing Exam (UDWE).

1. What is the UDWE?

Passing the Upper-Division Writing Exam is one of two ways that students can pass California State University, Fresno's Upper-Division Writing Skills (UDWS) requirement. The UDWS requirement is a system-wide mandate; it is impossible to waive or modify this requirement. The UDWS cannot be fulfilled by a class or test taken outside the CSU system, nor can it be satisfied by taking a course at a CSU campus at which the student has not matriculated. The UDWE requires students to answer two questions through essay responses. Students have one hour to complete each essay. Consult the two sample questions at the end of this document to learn how students are asked to respond to these questions.

2. When should I take the UDWE?

It is imperative that students satisfy the UDWS within two semesters after completing 60 units. It is the responsibility of each student to satisfy this requirement in a timely fashion. Students who wait until their final semesters of study often find that they are unable to graduate when they had planned to, because they have failed to satisfy the requirement. *If you have waited until your senior year to satisfy this requirement, your graduation may be delayed.*

3. What if I don't pass the UDWE?

Students who do not pass the UDWE are able to take the exam a second time. Students who fail the UDWE a second time *must* enroll in an approved "W" course to fulfill the requirement.

4. If I have received good grades on my college essays and/or done well on previous timed writing exams, will I pass the UDWE?

Past performance on writing assignments and essay exams is no guarantee that a student will perform well on the UDWE. The criteria for passing the UDWE are designed specifically to measure upper-division writing competence by means of this exam.

5. How will my essay be scored?

Each of the two essays students write for the UDWE is read by different faculty readers who assess the essay in what is called a "blind" reading. That is, after

extensive on-site discussion of sample essays and the application of the scoring guide to these essays, two different faculty readers review and assess each response. Faculty readers assess each essay according to specific criteria and without access to the other readers' scores. Readers consider each essay holistically (that is, in such a manner that no single aspect of the essay unduly outweighs other aspects of the writing) in light of how well the student demonstrates the following writing skills:

- The writer understands the prompt and thoughtfully and thoroughly responds to it.
- The writer demonstrates a clear sense of purpose and maintains a strong focus.
- The writer organizes her or his ideas effectively, providing a useful introduction and a conclusion, as well as effective paragraphs and transitions.
- The writer supports his or her claims with specific details and appropriate examples.
- The writer composes a persuasive, logical, and fully developed essay response.
- The writing is generally free of mechanical errors and reveals a clear grasp of proper sentence structure and a mature writing style.

Each faculty reader will score the essay as demonstrating the features of upper-division writing competence. In light of the above-mentioned criteria, each essay is determined to be *Competent*, demonstrating *Developing Competence*, or *Incompetent*. For students to pass the UDWE, at least two faculty readers must assess the writing as *Competent*, and no faculty reader should assess any one of the essays as *Incompetent*.

6. Is my score final?

Yes. Students either pass or fail the UDWE. All assessments are final and are not subject to appeal. A question leader assigned to supervise the reading will consider and resolve any scoring discrepancies before the scores are calculated and submitted to the Testing Office.

7. How can I prepare to take the UDWE?

You can prepare for the exam by studying the following sample questions and allowing yourself the opportunity to answer the questions in writing within the given time constraints. Any advice you receive from a counselor may prove helpful in determining whether you should take the UDWE; however, such advice is no guarantee that you will perform well on the UDWE.

Question #1

You have 60 minutes to respond to the following prompt. Allow yourself ten to fifteen minutes to read and annotate the passage and organize your ideas.

Read the following essay by Steven Johnson titled "I Can Stop Playing Anytime I Want," which appeared in the September 26, 2005 issue of *Newsweek International*. Johnson is a popular science writer and the author of *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter* (2006).

Early this August, [2005] a 28-year-old South Korean man died of heart failure after playing the computer game *Starcraft* for 50 straight hours. When the story hit the wires, you could almost hear all the parents of teenage gamers across the planet collectively shriek: "I told you so!"

Even the most ardent defenders of gaming culture—and I happen to be one—have to admit that videogames have an addictive power that is stronger than the siren songs of other media. You sit down to play *Halo* for a few minutes after dinner, and the next thing you know it's midnight. You find yourself daydreaming new strategies for your characters in *The Sims* while sitting through a meeting at work. Most of us manage to avoid the 50-hour marathons, of course, but even five straight hours of *Starcraft* is obsessive enough.

There's a neurological explanation for that addictiveness. The human brain is wired to respond strongly to situations that combine both the promise of reward and the exploration of new environments. The neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp, a professor emeritus at Bowling Green State University, calls this the "seeking circuitry" of the brain. Its evolutionary advantages are easy to understand: brains wired to search their environments for food or shelter or mates are more likely to survive and pass their genes on to the next generation. The seeking circuitry is largely controlled by the neurotransmitter dopamine, which also plays a crucial role in most addictive drugs.

Among all forms of popular entertainment, videogames are uniquely designed as hybrids of reward and exploration: you probe a virtual world, looking for a veritable treasure chest of prizes—access to new levels, new weapons, magic coins, special privileges. This is not the cognitive environment of movies or music or books—we don't "explore" these forms in anything but the more figurative sense of the word. Reward exploration is the defining experience of gaming, which means it is custom-tailored to attract the attention of the human brain. No wonder studies have shown that gameplay triggers dopamine release in the brain.

Here's where we need to be careful. Noting the connection between dopamine and gameplay is not reason to assume that videogames are the digital version of crack cocaine. Addictive drugs are dangerous because they alter the supply of neurotransmitters directly. Since we don't ingest videogames, they're limited in

their immediate chemical power over the brain. Besides, many life experiences that we cherish and encourage in our kids activate the dopamine system. The high-school honors student who works hard to earn that A and her parents' praise—her drive for intellectual reward—is triggering dopamine release in her brain as well. On some basic level, that's what her drive is.

Right now, of course, the virtual rewards of gaming tend to be childish or violent, though a growing number of games offer more sophisticated pleasures. But as the gaming generation grows up—the average player is now 29—those rewards will become less fanciful and escapist in nature. Ten years from now the line between real life and games will have blurred significantly. Saying that someone is "addicted" to a game will sound as odd as saying someone is addicted to having friends, or keeping up with his extended family.

People spend so much time in multiplayer games like *EverQuest* and the burgeoning [online] communities of *There* and *Second Life* not because they want to finish the game the way my generation wanted to make it all the way to the end of *Pac-Man* or *Myst*, but because they've literally become part of the world in which they live; the fate of their own characters has become emotionally tied to their own fate as human beings. And because these spaces are where they've made some of their closest friends, even if they've never seen them face to face. In 10 years, the idea of having a virtual avatar will be almost as commonplace as having a virtual address (think e-mail) is today.

Will that mean that we're "addicted" to these online environments? No more so than many of us today are addicted to talking on the phone. We readily accept the idea that the phone is a legitimate channel of communication, even though it compresses our voice into a pale imitation of itself and leaves the rest to the imagination. We've lived with the phone medium for long enough that it doesn't seem artificial anymore. We'll go through the same acclimation process with our on-screen avatars. No doubt there will be something playful in exploring these new spaces with our virtual friends. But it won't be a game.

In an organized and fully developed essay, consider Johnson's argument about whether videogames should be considered addictive. Identify what you understand to be Johnson's main point. Then, describe and evaluate the evidence he uses to support his claims. Finally, explain whether you find his argument persuasive and the degree to which it is useful in determining whether playing videogames can be addictive.

Question #2

You have 60 minutes to respond to the following prompt. Allow yourself ten to fifteen minutes to read and annotate the passage and organize your ideas.

Consider the following account of the problem of childhood obesity in today's society:

An August 2003 lawsuit filed by the parents of two teenage girls claimed that McDonald's was deceptive regarding the effects of their food and should therefore be held responsible for the girls' health problems, which included obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure and cholesterol, and heart disease. Although Judge Robert Sweet ruled in favor of McDonald's, stating that the plaintiffs failed to show that the products consumed were "dangerous in any way other than that which was open and obvious to a reasonable consumer," the lawsuit raised the question: Who is responsible for childhood obesity?

Unfortunately, the United States is facing an obesity epidemic—an epidemic from which children are not immune. The increase in childhood obesity is leading to health problems previously only seen in adults, such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol. Excess weight also contributes to other health conditions, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, asthma, sleep disorders, eating disorders, some forms of cancer, and even early-onset puberty. Additionally, children who are obese tend to become obese adults. Although they are rare, genetic or hormonal conditions, such as Praer-Willi syndrome, which causes chronic hunger and growth problems, sometimes causes childhood obesity. More typically, however, nutrition and inactivity are the root of the problem.¹

In an organized, thoughtful, and fully developed essay, explain what you understand to be the possible causes for childhood obesity, who or what you feel is responsible for the problem, and how our society can best address the issue. In composing your response, be sure you use sound reasoning and specific examples, which may come from your observations of the world around you, your reading and study on the subject, or your own experiences. You should also consider and respond to possible objections to your argument.

¹ "Childhood Obesity." *Current Issues: Macmillian Social Science Library*. Detroit: Gale, 2010. *Gale Opposing Viewpoints In Context*. Web. 16 Aug. 2011.