How to Take a College Placement Test

Guide Information
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Description: This guide explains what to expect, how to prepare, and what to do when you are going to take a college placement test.
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Describing the Placement Test

Welcome

It's a jungle out there, so you need a guide.
Quick Tip: Bring a photo ID to the placement test; they need to know you're you.

What is a college placement test?
Almost all students starting college everywhere take a test to help determine what courses they should take in three important areas: Reading, Writing, & Math. These tests are taken on computers.

Reading. You will read a passage that is from one to four or five sentences long. That's followed by a question and that's followed by four choices. Sometimes the question asks about the meaning of what you read, and sometimes it asks what a sentence is doing in the passage (choices for that question might be "It is contradicting the previous sentence" or "It is supplying a supporting example"). The choice you want may not be among the four that you are given, but don't let that bother you. Just pick the best option, and you can go back and re-read the passage if you want. (Notice, though, that once you leave a passage and its question, you cannot go back to it.) Then you do that over again, 20 times in all for JCC. Our test is not timed, but some reading tests are, so be sure you know before you start.

One other thing; JCC's reading test adapts to your skill level. That means if you get a question right, the next question will be harder, and if you answer that one right the next will be even harder. The questions will keep getting harder until you get some wrong; that's how it knows your level, see? So if the questions seem to get worse, that means you're doing really well!

Writing. Some colleges measure writing with multiple choice questions, but most, including JCC, give you a topic and ask you to write an essay that's from 300 to 600 words long. We give you 60 minutes to do that. You will be taking a writing course, and this test will tell you which one.

Math. You will need to select which math test to take, so remember how much training in math you have had and think about how much you remember, too: no algebra, or a little, or algebra is easy, or you're comfortable with precalculus, and so forth. As with writing, JCC requires you to take a college-level math course, and this test determines which course is right for you. And as with the reading test, this one is adaptive too, so when the questions keep getting harder you can be confident that you've been giving right answers.

What kinds of questions will be asked?
Sample questions are linked below, but first one word of caution. You will find publishers who sell books or programs on how to prepare for college placement tests. Unlike the SAT and ACT preparation programs, which help many, the guides to placement tests are not worth the money. Their pitch goes like this:

First they try to scare you by having you imagine how devastated you will be when you find out that you can't get into the college-level courses that all your friends are in, all because of Accuplacer (that's the name of the placement tests JCC uses). Second, they tell you that standardized tests don't measure what you know but only how well you can play the game of taking the test. Third, they promise to explain all the rules of the Accuplacer game if you will just buy their book (the one I've seen costs $39.99).

Even if this were true, do you really want to use some trick so you jump into courses that you don't have the background for? If you're tempted, at least wait until you have read this LibGuide before spending your money.

- Sample Questions from College Board

College Board creates JCC's placement tests, so when you open the pdf here you will have the best sample questions available. Just be sure to skip the Sentence Skills section (for a test you won't take at JCC) and go right to Reading Comprehension, then Writeplacer, and then the three levels of math tests.

Why does the college require me to take it?

The purpose of the test is to get you enrolled in the right class. Here's the most important thing I have to say in this box: You cannot fail a placement test. It's just not that kind of test.

So it is not like a driver's test or a drug test or my biology final in tenth grade. Those can be failed. It's more like the eye exam you take to get fitted for contacts. The optician never tells you that you failed and you must leave the office immediately. Instead, everyone involved tries to get a true measure of how well you can see so you wind up with the right pair of contact lenses.

We want to get you into the right courses, and by that we mean right for you, not for us. As long as you are not in a math course where you have no idea what those symbols on the board mean, and you don't find yourself in a writing course where everything being taught is stuff you already know, then the college is good.

What are the consequences of the placement test?

The reading test will determine if you need either one of two preparatory courses in reading before you get into courses which place a high demand on your reading skills. It's likely that you have never taken courses which required that you get as much out of your reading as you will in college. Think about this: in high school you met about 225 minutes a week in a course that lasted about 36 weeks. In college, you work at a higher level in courses that meet for 150 minutes per week over fifteen weeks. That huge difference in time spent learning in the classroom is mostly made up by your reading. Much less time with an instructor; much more time with a textbook. And the second thing to remember is that most of us don't really know how good a reader we are, since it's pretty hard for people to compare their reading ability. How well we read is mostly invisible. At JCC, reading courses do not carry college credit.

The writing test will direct you into one of three writing classes: Essential Writing Skills is not for college credit and works on basic correctness; English Composition 1 is for college credit and builds essay and paper writing abilities; English Composition 2 develops your research writing skills.

The math test will help an advisor place you into one of these:
- a non-college credit course in prealgebra
- non-college credit courses in algebra
- a college credit course in problem solving
- college credit courses in algebra or statistics
- courses in precalculus or calculus

All JCC students must take at least one college-credit math course. Which one and how many others you will need depend upon what degree you seek.

What is the difference between college-credit and non-college credit courses? A course that does not earn college credit (instead, it earns imputed credit) does not contribute to the credit hours you need for your degree; that's 60 college credits for most Associate degrees. In general, courses receiving imputed credit cover material traditionally handled in high schools, though usually at an advanced pace.

About me & Disclaimer

I am Dale Yerpe, professor of English at Jamestown Community College. I've written this guide to answer questions about placement and to remove some misconceptions that I hear from time to time. If you have questions this guide doesn't answer, the best thing you can do is pick up the phone and call the college at 716-338-1065.

While the college has supported me in developing this LibGuide, JCC cannot be held responsible for the opinions and conclusions in it. Similarly, the websites linked here are offered for whatever usefulness they may have and do not necessarily represent the views of either myself or JCC.
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Preparing for the Test

Can I prepare for the placement test?

Yes, you can prepare for the placement test, but it's probably not the same way you used to prepare for the history test or English quiz. Prepare by getting into the right frame of mind and limbering up, especially if it's been a few years since you were in the classroom.

Getting there. Know where the placement test will be: where you can park, which entrance to which building to go to, and what room you will be in. If the testing is being done while classes are in session, allow an extra couple of minutes to negotiate the parking lot and corridors. If you're late and hurried, you won't do as well as you could. You also won't do as well if you are hungry or sleepy.

The right frame of mind. Most importantly, don't think of this as one more bureaucratic hurdle to get through before you can start college. Taking the placement test is starting college, so clear your slate for three hours and focus your attention on being a college student. Don't take the test on the way to somewhere else. Don't have someone waiting impatiently for you. Don't be in a hurry to get it done and get back to work. Don't worry about how much the baby sitter is costing you. Just get to the test on time and forget about the rest of your life. Once you enter that room, you are only a student.

Limber up, mentally. This is mostly what the next box to the right is about: getting back into the frame of mind that a student is in. Remember what that's like: reading a question; thinking up a response; reading sentences to notice subtle differences; stretching your vocabulary; recalling those mathematical symbols; and solving arithmetic problems without a calculator. In addition, can you be comfortable completing the test at a computer? You will need to compose your essay at a keyboard. If this poses a problem for you, be sure to let the college know ahead of time, because they may be able to offer you an alternative.

How do I prepare?

Reading: You are not going to make yourself a better reader in a couple of days or a couple of weeks, and if you regularly read a variety of things - magazines, news sites, books, cereal boxes - you are probably already prepared. But if you aren't much of a reader, you can shake off the cobwebs a bit. Newspapers, or their equivalent online, are good. Everyday read a couple of articles (editorials & columns especially) and then quiz yourself, or even better have someone else quiz you. For each article ask:

- Did the headline really help me predict what the story would be about?
- What was the most important thing I read?
- What did I read that I disagree with, or that someone else would disagree with? What would they say?
- What proof does the writer offer for what he says?
- Where does the writer contrast one thing with another (as in two opinions, past and present, ideal and reality...)?

Answering such questions is good practice and similar to the reading you will do on the placement test and in the college classroom.
Writing: Write some paragraphs, and not with a pen and paper but at a computer keyboard. Most placement tests (and plenty of professors) ask for a piece of writing 500 words long, so it's good to get comfortable with that length. Here are some topics:

- Identify someone who seems like a hero to you, and explain why.
- Do you think most people get what they deserve in life?
- Is the world really changing as fast as people say?
- Write your own response to an op-ed news column.

Just writing it is good practice, but you might also ask these: Did I write it in four or five paragraphs? Is my main idea clear in the first paragraph? Did I give examples of what I was saying? Are my explanations understandable? When I read it aloud does it sound OK?

Also notice what your word processor's spell-check and grammar-check does. Your placement test essay will be graded by a computer program that has something in common with those checkers. Every item grammar-check underlines would be a mark against your essay on the test.

Math: There's no way around it: you have to do some math problems. The College Board site and Khan Academy, both linked in the box to the right, are your best bets. Remember, it's not that you need to learn new information. You just need to recall what you already know how to do.

Where can I brush up my skills?

- Sample Questions from College Board
  College Board creates JCC's placement tests, so when you open the pdf here you will have the best sample questions available. Just be sure to skip the Sentence Skills section (for a test you won't take at JCC) and go right to Reading Comprehension, then Writing, and then the three levels of math tests.

- Khan Academy
  [http://www.khanacademy.org](http://www.khanacademy.org)
  This amazing website has over 3,000 teaching videos, many of them under five minutes in length. If you need to remember anything from algebra, you will find it there in the title of a video. The largest sections are Algebra and pre-Algebra, but it has good sections on Differential Equations and Calculus, too. Nothing yet on writing or reading.

- Practice Tests in Reading and Math
  [http://web.nei.edu/asc/prctckt.htm](http://web.nei.edu/asc/prctckt.htm)
  These are brief tests scored online, posted by the Academic Skills Center of the New England Institute of Technology.
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Taking the Test

Reading
You can see a description of the reading test, and the others, under the green tab above and on the left. The reading test has you read passages and answer questions about what you read. My tips:

- Take a pencil or your finger and try brushing it across the screen underneath the words your eyes are reading. If you have a tendency to jump over words, this might help prevent that.
- Don't rush. The test is not timed.
- Fight any tendency to get irritated or absolutely bored with the test. Take each question one at a time. It doesn't matter if it's item 2 or item 18; just forget about anything except what you are reading at the moment. Be patient.
- Be alert, but don't overthink your answers. If you can't make up your mind, go with your first choice.
- Fight not caring. I sometimes hear students say, "After a while I just didn't care and put down anything so I could get out of there." That's not the sort of attitude it takes to be a good student.

Writing
For the writing placement test you will compose an essay on a computer. At JCC, this is the only timed test; you will have one hour. The best advice is to think through your topic and decide generally what you plan to say before you start writing. Jot down your main idea and a few other things you will say in your introduction. Plan for four or five more paragraphs, with each having a separate job to do, such as explaining a key term or idea, providing an example of what you mean, or offering some sort of evidence.

Because the essay is read by computer, it's a good idea to:

- avoid writing near the shorter or longer limits; at least 500 words is good.
- avoid overly long or especially short sentences. Plain, clear statements are best.
- avoid complicated sentence constructions, the kind with lots of interrupting phrases or qualifications and convoluted explanations.
- make all your paragraphs at least two sentences, and three or four is even better.
- give a clear statement of your main idea in the last sentence of your first paragraph and again in your last paragraph.
- watch your punctuation: be sure every question has a question mark and avoid dashes, semi-colons, colons, and exclamation points.
- use at least three paragraphs, but four or five is better.
- give your essay a title.

Proof read your essay to be sure you have not left out words you want or left in words you meant to remove. As you read, mentally voice each word to yourself, following along on the screen with your pencil or finger.
Don't rush, but JCC allows one re-test within a year

Mathematics

The math test is not timed, so you can go at your own pace. Some tips:

- Be sure to understand what you are being asked to do.
- Work through your answers with pencil and paper.
- Resist the temptation to become annoyed by these problems. Just take them one step at a time.
- Relax. Stretch. Take a deep breath.

More Math Practice

Under the Preparing tab you have some links for brushing up on your math skills. That might be enough, but if you want more, here are a few helpful sites.

- Anoka Ramsey Community College Math Department
  This math department has posted sample questions, answers, and video explanations of the answers for Arithmetic, Algebra, and College Math.

- Readiness Tests in precalculus and calculus
  http://indtp.ucsd.edu/OnlTests.html
  These tests are taken and graded online, presented by California State University and the University of California.

- Elementary Algebra Study Guide
  http://www.ohlone.edu/org/placement/docs/studyguide-elementseralgebra.pdf
  This is a pdf of a placement test followed by answers, prepared by Arno Community College and posted by the Ohlone College Placement Center