



TSI STUDY GUIDES

Hints and tips to make testing easier

Abstract

This guide is intended to assist students in passing the TSI assessments by informing them of what they can expect to be tested over and, therefore, avoiding time and resource-consuming pre-requisite classes that may or may not apply to their degree plans.

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Hello! Looks like you're going to take the TSI. The experience can be dreadful or even enjoyable, but it depends on how you approach it and how prepared you are. Yes, it is fairly long if you take all parts on the same day, and the essay comes after the reading and writing sections, so after this, you STILL have the math section. You do have the option of taking each section on separate days and retaking any section you don't pass, but let's try our best to get this thing done in one fell swoop.

How to Make the TSI Reading Section Manageable

Ready? Here's the first section: Reading. This section contains various fiction and non-fiction passages and can be fairly tricky if you aren't prepared to answer a variety of detailed and broad questions. Considering it's the starting point, it can be easy to exhaust someone because of the various subjects you will need to read about and interpret.

For this section, you will have 20 multiple-choice questions and several passages to read, some of which are reoccurring, so it helps to read slowly and carefully. Passing TSI Reading scores range from 351 to 390 with each question being weighted, so we are aiming to only get one to three questions incorrect. That seems like it could be a bit anxiety-inducing, but it doesn't have to be. With the right strategies, approach, and inner voice, it's manageable.

The first key thing to keep in mind is the benefit of pretending like you are reading a passage as if you know nothing about the subject or story at all. Make sure to also read each word that is actually printed in the text from the author's perspective; try to mimic their tone and feel what they might have felt when they wrote about the subject at hand while reading their words. Be prepared to use context clues to try to understand what message the author is trying to convey because you will read everything from modern-day writers to not-so-recent authors. In addition to that, make sure that you are paying close attention to the word choice of the author and being curious as to why they may have chosen the words they did. This can make the reading more enjoyable, especially since several of the passages are informative or from classic literature.

Double check that the main idea of the passage and the author's purpose is clear to you before you move on to the question below it. There are a few very general main idea and purpose questions you will need to answer, but there will be answers that, while true, are not relevant to what the author has talked about or will only mention a singular thing that the author talked about rather than the entire topic. However, there are occasions where the question will request that you pull a specific detail out of the passage and match it with one of the answers.

Answering some of the questions does not always involve such basic strategies. There are questions that will ask you to compare two passages from different authors and deduce what both authors may agree or disagree upon when no clues are explicitly given. You may also have to infer information that an author might follow up the given text with, what they are trying to elude to based on what they have already written, or what they may mean by a certain word or phrase. Other times, you may have to answer questions about the author's writing strategies versus just the content of the passage or passages.

So, take your time to absorb the writing styles, content, and sentence structure and vocabulary. Since you will be taking the writing section next, it would be beneficial to pay close attention to the grammar and punctuation of the passages you will be reading so that you can transfer that same structure and conveying of information over to the next section. You can't skip questions, so if you encounter one with an answer that's not too obvious or you are torn between two answer choices, pick the best one and move on to the next passage and question. Unfortunately, this being a computer-based test means that you can't mark up or highlight parts of the passages, but you will have scratch paper available to make notes as you read. Each passage is pretty short, so you shouldn't have so much stuff written that it will be hard to keep track of. Try to find some story excerpts online and see, if after reading them, you can point out the main idea, purpose, and understand all of the vocabulary. Go get, 'em!

What to Know for the TSI Writing Section

Ok, it's time to think about the writing section of the TSI. I never hear anyone ever really worry about this section because they found it seems to be pretty right off the bat easy, but in case you don't want to leave things to chance, let's check out what you will need to know.

First, it contains 20 multiple choice questions and is right before you write the accompanying essay. If you aren't able to score a 6 on the essay, then you can earn a multiple-choice score of at least 350 and an essay score of 5 or a multiple-choice score of at least 363 and an essay score of 4 and still pass the entire section. Remember, the TSI scores range from 351 to 390 and each question is weighted, so we can safely say one to three questions is a safe bet. But let's not think about it like that. Let's show the test what we know.

Key things to do here are to read carefully. CAREFULLY. You want to make sure that you are reading each word as it appears in the text, not as it should appear or what sounds correct. The answer choices may only differ by one punctuation mark, so check out every answer choice before deciding which one to mark down as your answer. Remember, it is not timed, but you can't return to a question, so you will need to give each answer a thorough vetting. Yes, there is a NO CHANGE option and it will be a valid answer choice at times.

When reading the answer choices, I utilize “pauses” (one beat) and “full stops” (two beats) to help me “hear” how commas and periods, respectively, would sound; I give semi-colons a “three-quarters stop,” something in between a pause and a full stop. Test each answer choice because one might sound good but the next might sound better. You aren’t going to be able to read anything aloud as you will most likely be testing alongside other testers (even whispered reading can be distracting to some testers), but try to really hear yourself reading it in your head, or even pick out a favorite musician, actor, other celebrity, character, or cool person in your life to read it to you. This might seem silly, but I’m sure it will take the edge off having to deal with testing in the first place.

There are times when the exam will ask you to replace, rewrite, or insert a sentence or phrase. Although we can normally get away with just reading the sentences or phrases that have been marked for editing, we will need to have some context clues because a couple of the answer choices will make sense independently of them. For gathering context clues, a good start is to read the sentence right before and the sentence right after what is to be edited, a better idea is to read the entire paragraph that contains it, and the best way to gather the most clues is to go ahead and read the entire passage. Some of the passages are fairly interesting, too.

To close, take your time in working through this section. Since the essay is next, perhaps your reading can give you some ideas or warm your brain up to the abstract and philosophical thinking and essay formatting required for it. The same as before, if you encounter a question that you aren’t sure how to answer, it’s best for your stress level to settle on the answer you think is best so that you have plenty of brain power left heading into the essay. Feel free to rewrite answer choices and edits on the scratch paper provided. You still CAN retest if you need to within a short time frame, but you’d have to take both the multiple choice and essay sections together, so let’s get both of them taken care of at once. For practice, look up some editing or proofreading games online or try typing or writing random sentences and reconfigure them by playing with punctuation and other grammar essentials. Knock it out!

How to Pass the TSI Essay Section With Ease

Next up: the essay section. Writing can sometimes be dreadful if you’ve only done it for grading purposes, but being able to express your thoughts in written word is necessary. I understand that being so detail-oriented right before you are asked to think about a philosophical topic is a big switch. Regardless of how many sections you will be taking on the day of your test, there are some ways that will help you get through the essay with a low amount of stress.

Perhaps you have looked at the College Board's sample essays. Those 7 and 8-earning essays are kind of scary, like the person is an "encyclopedia," as some of my other students have said. I feel the same way. I'm not expecting you to get a 7 or 8 because all you need to do is show the scoring software (yes, a computer program scores your essay) that you can form a good argument with solid examples and use decent grammar and vocabulary. Passing is either a score of 5 or a 363 on the writing and a score of 4 on the essay.

If you haven't realized it, the TSI will ask you to make an argument supporting one side of philosophical debate. Though the topics can be hard to argue because they are typically asking you to make black and white a somewhat grey topic, they are not judging you based on which argument you need to make; rather, they are looking at HOW you support your argument with examples, evidence, and appropriate sentence structure. My recommendation is to, first, use the scratch paper provided to make a two-column list or other graphic organizer (venn diagram, mind map, etc.) to help you literally see and determine which side of the debate will be easiest to argue. Once you figure out which side has the strongest evidence, or even which you prefer to argue, then you can start shaping your content.

As far as essay structure goes, a 4 or 5 paragraph essay, depending on how many points you will want to argue, is a solid set up. You will need an intro, two or three body paragraphs and a conclusion, very similar to the basic 5-paragraph essay format you've used in school before. The intro hooks the reader into the topic by initially talking about it in broad terms and then siphoning it down to the thesis. The thesis lets the reader know which side of the debate you are taking and why, so this is where you take charge of your argument with confidence. Each body paragraph discusses one of the points you are going to argue, which you will introduce in the first topic sentence and close out at the end of the paragraph. The conclusion wraps up the entire thing by paraphrasing the thesis first, then summarizing the topic sentences from the body paragraphs, and, finally, closing out with a bold statement gets the reader to continue thinking about your side of the debate. This essay is going to end up being 300 to 600 words, so if you pick solid examples and make sure you explain them well, it won't be hard to reach.

The body paragraphs are the meat of the essay around which your intro and conclusion will be formed; however, feel free to start with which ever paragraph is easiest. You will need at least two, strong examples that back up your side of the debate. Fortunately, the examples can come from a variety of sources like fiction or non-fiction books, your personal life, a celebrity or public figure, or even a play or a movie that aren't necessarily well-known. You can even make up a story or situation, as long as it is analogous to your side of the debate (this is a last resort in case you brain fart). The first sentence will tell the reader the point you are going to make, the "filler" sentences will tell the story or explain the example you picked, and the last sentence will wrap up the paragraph with a conclusive, argument-benefitting statement about the entire example. No need to make a circular argument. That's when you say something like, "The bird is well-know because it is talked about a lot and that's why it is well-known." Do not do this.

My final tips are to make sure that your grammar, sentence structure, spelling are at least decent and don't take away from the argument you are trying to make; a few errors are not going to tank your score and you won't have a dictionary or other resource available to you, so if you encounter something you are not sure about, it's best for your stress level to let it be as you have typed it and move on to the next item. Also, use all of the scratch paper you need. Once you decide on a side of the debate to argue, just start, and be mindful of your grammar and punctuation as you go. The last things to do are to rescan your essay for clarity and redundancy and other small errors you may have missed initially. See if you can change some of your wording to make it sound "better" or use "bigger words," but it doesn't have to sound like a scholar wrote it. If you get a chance, practice with an essay topic beforehand so you can start putting these strategies into place. Tear it up!

What to Expect on the TSI Math Section

You've done it! The final section of the TSI. After all of that hard work, you get to do calculations, algebra, and geometry. Yay. This section holds nothing that you haven't seen before, although it may have been a while since you have seen it.

You won't be able to bring your favorite calculator, but there is an on-screen calculator you can use and plenty of scratch paper. I recommend being at least a little mathematically independent from it because it only has a few functions and may have a slight learning curve attached to it. You will need a score of 351 to pass, which, once again, means that you can safely miss between one and three questions.

You'll be tested on Algebra I and II, Geometry, and some Statistics, only probability and measures of central tendency. You will see graphs, charts, linear, quadratic, exponential, square root, and rational functions, systems of equations, rational functions, algebraic expressions and equations, and inequalities. Some questions are "regular" math problems and a lot are word problems, and you will have to solve or evaluate, simplify, translate from word to math, and match graphs with their equations.

Since all questions are multiple choice, you do have the option of solving some of them either the "right way" or "backwards," meaning you can plug the answers into the equation and check if it works out. Some of them will require you to solve them the "right way" and others are more flexible, but there are one or two problems that can only be solved by referring to the answers. Factoring and FOILing, or polynomial multiplication, are essential skills to know how to do well. You can use the answers to any factoring or FOILing problem to help clue you in on what the correct answer might look like, but there may be several problems where you will have to find the solution by factoring correctly.

The word problems are more challenging than usual since you will be looking at them on a computer and there is no option to highlight or mark on them, so it's best to go over strategies that will help you "pull" important information from them, like defining each variable and writing the corresponding value next to it or just writing each number with a description of what it means nearby. For the graphing problems you may not need to draw the whole graph out on your scratch paper, but it may be helpful to use the eraser end of your pencil to help you count or line up things on the screen.

Finally, remember that you might be pretty tired after testing in all of the sections, so write and calculate carefully. Go ahead and breaks between a certain number or questions or even each question since they will be fairly randomized, you will have to recall a new set of information each time, and you won't get to skip and return to it later. The process of elimination and estimating are great ways to narrow down and cancel out bad answers and make taking an educated guess easier, if you need to do that. Watch carefully for answers that look very similar because they might only differ by a sign change. Math can sometimes be the "downfall" of student test scores, but it doesn't have to be for you. I consider math to be a different language, so if you have any types of strategies for learning languages, like repetition and review, flash cards for formulas, and application of processes, use them to help solidify your working knowledge of it. There are many worksheets all over the internet that pertain to certain math processes, so check some out if you are wanting more practice. It's not a race, so work at your own pace. Best of luck!

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