Test Takers’ Judgments About GRE® Writing Test Prompts

Donald E. Powers and Mary E. Fowles

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Test Takers' Judgments About GRE Writing Test Prompts

Abstract

This study gathered the judgments of various GRE test takers about a total of 78 essay prompts that were being considered for possible use in a GRE writing test. The objective was to determine the kinds of prompts and topics on which examinees feel they can write strong essays, as well as those that they perceive as more difficult. The study identified several features that underlie examinee assessments of essay prompts.

Some of the study participants also wrote essays on a small subset of the prompts, and their opinions of the prompts were compared to the scores that GRE readers assigned to their essays. This comparison revealed only a weak and inconsistent relationship between writers' judgments about the prompts and their performance on those prompts.

The report discusses the implications of the findings for the development of the GRE writing test and for advising GRE examinees on how to approach the test.
Test Takers' Judgments About GRE Writing Test Prompts

Introduction

"Revisit your topics." That's how one professor responded to an early 1992 survey of faculty interest in the development of a GRE writing assessment. The writing task under consideration at that time asked examinees to discuss topics about science, social science, or the humanities — an inappropriate demand, according to this professor, who went on to say that

... the topics are not top priority in the lives of students. At the college level, the rich ways in which [the increasing number of non-traditional students] relate what they are now learning to what they know of life is a benefit to all of us. If we do not provide avenues for them to express these connections, we are indeed missing an opportunity.

Although this sentiment was not shared by the majority of the faculty who responded to the 1992 survey, the point is well taken: assessors of writing skill should endeavor to develop writing prompts that, at the very least, do not make inappropriate demands of writers and, to the extent possible, allow test takers to draw on their interests as well as their experiences. (An alternative view, however, is that for high-stakes examinations such as the GRE writing test, examinees should be sufficiently motivated to perform well on any relevant or "appropriate" topic regardless of how appealing it seems to the individual writer.) Implicit in the first belief, is the notion that performance on a writing test is related to examinee interest in, as well as familiarity with, the topics that constitute the test. This notion is consistent with research showing that poor test performance (and more generally, ineffective cognitive processing) may be the result, at least in part, of learners' lack of engagement in the tasks they are asked to perform (Tobias, 1994). Research on interest and learning (Hidi & Anderson, 1992) has in fact shown that students who are interested in a topic pay greater attention, persist longer, and learn more than less interested students. Most research of this nature has focused on the role of interest in reading comprehension (Anderson, Shirey, Wilson, & Fielding, 1987; Hidi & Baird, 1988). Hidi and McLaren's (1990) search failed to uncover any systematic research on the relationship of interest to performance on expository writing tasks and, according to Hidi & Anderson, as of 1992 writing researchers had failed to "seriously consider the role of interest in the production of written discourse" (p. 229).

More recently, Benton, Corkill, Sharp, Downey, & Khramtsova (1995) investigated the relationship of interest to writing performance, as well as the influence of knowledge about the topic. They found that interest and topic knowledge were moderately related to one another, and that each was related to several indicators of writing quality, such as organization and content relevance. Hidi and Anderson (1992) characterized their previous research (Hidi & McLaren, 1991) as demonstrating a "unique and unusually complex relation" (p. 233) among interest, knowledge, and writing performance. High interest without appropriate knowledge of a topic is unlikely to pay off, but high topic knowledge may compensate for lack of interest. Others (Tobias, 1994) have concluded that a

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1 Throughout this paper we use "task," "prompt," and "topic" in the following ways. "Task" or "writing task" refers to the full assignment, including the prompt and the topic. "Prompt" refers specifically to the text that an examinee must read and respond to when writing. "Topic" refers to the subject matter, issues, ideas, information, or content about which examinees must think and write.
strong, linear relationship exists between interest in and prior knowledge about a subject. However, greater familiarity with a topic does not always correlate with better writing (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987).

Although the influence of interest and knowledge on writing performance is not fully understood, some theories are worth mentioning. Cognitive scientists (Kellogg, 1987) have hypothesized that the greater the knowledge of a topic, the greater the effort available for organizing ideas, as opposed to generating and retrieving them. Likewise, fewer cognitive resources are often needed for responding to interesting topics than to uninteresting ones (Hidi, 1990). This possibility seems especially germane to test-taking situations, in which time is often at a premium.

Presumably, there are other factors besides topic interest and topic knowledge that also determine performance on writing tests. In an extensive review of research on the direct assessment of writing, Huot (1990) examined studies that related the quality of students’ writing to various features of the writing tasks they were given. The three categories of features were (1) discourse mode (the type of writing called for), (2) rhetorical specification (the ways in which a writing task is specified or constrained), and (3) the wording and structure of prompts (for instance, whether prompts were phrased as questions or commands, and the degree of personal experience called for). Although acknowledging that the structure, wording, and overall presentation of a writing assignment can sometimes have important consequences for writing quality, Huot characterized the research on how particular features of writing tasks influence performance as basically “inconclusive” (p. 246). It is safe to say, he asserted, that the relation of writing performance to various features of the writing task is largely unknown. He suggested, however, that future research might provide information to guide the development of prompts for particular testing populations.

Even though the research on writing assessment offers few clear directives for developing prompts, definite guidelines do exist for evaluating the quality of writing prompts, both at ETS and in the scholarly literature on writing assessment. For example, Miller and Crocker (1990) stipulate that, for writing assessments in general, effective prompts should have the following characteristics. They should:

- be thought provoking to writers
- allow some latitude for individual expression
- relate to the general experience of all examinees
- provide no advantage to any particular subgroup

An example of a topic that is clearly outside the realm of some examinees’ general experience comes from a pool of prompts that were considered for the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) program’s Test of Written English (TWE). A prompt entitled “Changing weather conditions” did not survive pretest evaluation; it was rejected because test takers who live in perpetually hot and humid climates had difficulty relating to the topic.

But even prompts that are relatively accessible to all test takers may be problematic for other reasons. Murphy and Ruth (1993) point out the inextricable role of reading in writing assessment: to begin writing, examinees must first read and understand the essay prompt. It is sometimes assumed,
according to Murphy and Ruth, that everyone is getting the same message from the prompt. However, evidence from interviews with test takers suggests that alternative interpretations may arise, and just how people interpret a prompt can affect their essay scores.

It was in the spirit of the recommendation for additional research made by Huot (1990), the guidance provided by Miller and Crocker (1990), and the caveats issued by Murphy and Ruth (1993), among others, that this study was undertaken. More important, this study was also a response to the specific suggestions of faculty who serve on the GRE Writing Advisory Committee. In the development and initial evaluation of the new test, this committee stressed the importance of considering the views of test takers, especially members of various academic and ethnic groups in creating essay prompts. Behind this suggestion is a desire to ensure that the topics are appropriate for all examinees. According to some observers (Hamp-Lyons & Kroll, 1997), however, although teachers and test administrators are often asked to comment about essay prompts, the opinions of test takers themselves are rarely solicited.

The following questions were thus investigated in this study:

1. What are the perceptions and reactions of test takers to a sample of essay prompts being considered for use in the writing assessment? Are reactions related to the presence or absence of particular features of prompts?

2. Are there differences among subgroups of test takers with respect to their reactions to prompts?

3. Do writers earn higher essay scores on topics for which they think they can write better essays?

4. Does the validity of scores on the writing measure depend to any degree on examinees’ reaction to prompts (as evidenced by the correlation of writing test scores with other indicators of writing skill, such as writing produced for class assignments)?

Method

Sample Selection

Two separate data collections were undertaken. The first set of data was collected with the cooperation of 15 colleges and universities with significant numbers of minority students (see Appendix A). These institutions were primarily Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs) or historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Several also enrolled significant numbers of Native American students. Our request to the testing coordinators at these institutions was to recruit upper-division students who were considering graduate school. This study sample will be referred to as the HBCU/HSI sample.

Originally, we proposed to focus the study exclusively on minority students, but at the request of faculty who serve on the GRE Writing Advisory Committee, we extended data collection to include a representative sample of GRE examinees. Therefore, a second sample (n = 900) was drawn randomly from test takers who had registered for the GRE General Test in the summer of 1996. This sample will be referred to as the GRE sample.
Participants in both samples were asked to provide their opinions about “untried” prompts — that is, essay questions that had been prepared for pretesting in experimental sections of the GRE General Test. These questions required writers to present their views on an issue or opinion stated in the prompt. Each sample was divided into three subsamples (A, B, C), and each subsample was asked to judge 1/3 of the total pool of 78 prompts. In order to link judgments across the two samples (HBCU/HSI and GRE) and across the A, B, and C groups within each sample, all study participants rated a common set of six prompts. The six prompts were selected to represent the variety of content and phrasing of prompts in the larger pool. In addition, the HBCU/HSI participants wrote essays on the same prompts. (GRE participants did not write essays at all.) By repeating this small subset of prompts in every phase of the study, we were able to analyze not only the consistency of opinions across populations, but also the consistency within the same population before and after the experience of actually writing on those same topics. Table 1 shows the data collection design. The administration procedures for each sample were somewhat different and will be described separately below.

Table 1
Data Collection Design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Form/Subsample</th>
<th>Prompts Rated by the HBCU/HSI Sample</th>
<th>Prompts Rated by the GRE Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre:</td>
<td>12 prompts (set 1) plus 6 “common set” prompts*</td>
<td>24 prompts (sets 1 and 2) plus 6 “common set” prompts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post:</td>
<td>12 prompts (set 2) plus 6 “common set” prompts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre:</td>
<td>12 prompts (set 3) plus 6 “common set” prompts*</td>
<td>24 prompts (sets 3 and 4) plus 6 “common set” prompts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post:</td>
<td>12 prompts (set 4) plus 6 “common set” prompts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre:</td>
<td>12 prompts (set 5) plus 6 “common set” prompts*</td>
<td>24 prompts (sets 5 and 6) plus 6 “common set” prompts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post:</td>
<td>12 prompts (set 6) plus 6 “common set” prompts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre:</td>
<td>78 prompts, six of which were rated twice by each subsample</td>
<td>78 prompts, six of which were rated once by each subsample</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post:</td>
<td>78 prompts, six of which were rated twice by each subsample</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*After rating these 18 prompts, each HBCU/HSI participant wrote essays on two “common set” prompts.
Procedures

Common Directions for Rating the Prompts

Participants in both samples were given the same instructions for rating a set of essay prompts:

*Please read the list of essay topics that follow. Think briefly about what you might write about each one if it were presented to you in a 45-minute time period. Some topics may be of more interest to you than others, and you may have more ideas about some topics than others. However, rate each topic according to how strong/good an essay you think you could write on it. In your ratings, assume that your essay would be judged according to how well you:*

- organize, develop, and express your ideas on a topic
- use reasons and examples to support your point of view
- follow the conventions of standard written English (grammar, usage, mechanics)

Ratings were made on a seven-point scale from 7 = “Extremely Good” to 1 = “Extremely Poor.” Participants were also asked to designate the single prompt for which they thought they could write the best essay, to identify the prompt for which it would be most difficult to write a good essay, and to explain why they singled out these particular prompts. Note that the GRE sample did not write essays, and so these participants rated all of their prompts at one time, not before and after writing essays.

Additional Essay-Writing Procedure for the HBCU/HSI Sample

After rating a portion of the essay prompts, HBCU/HSI participants wrote essays on two of the six common prompts. The six prompts were paired in 30 possible permutations and administered at the study sites, starting with a different pair at each site so as to maintain relatively equal numbers of each pair. The order of administration was counterbalanced, with each topic presented first or second equally often. The directions were the same as those used in GRE pretest administrations of the prompts.

Next, HBCU/HSI participants rated a second set of essay prompts; the six common prompts served as a pre- and post-test, allowing us to identify whether the experience of writing in response to a prompt affects writers’ ratings of the prompt. It also permitted the estimation of the consistency of ratings given by study participants.

Common Procedures for Answering a Questionnaire

Participants were also asked to compare their writing skills to those of other students in the same major field of study and to indicate their success with various kinds of writing activities and assignments in college. Relevant background information was also collected.
For the HBCU/HSI sample, questionnaires were administered at the testing site on campus. For the GRE sample, the questionnaires and prompts to be rated were simply mailed to the GRE examinees shortly after they had registered to take the GRE General Test. Each HBCU/HSI participant received $40 for the time they spent in writing two essays. To maximize motivation to write the essays, additional stipends of $100 were offered to the 10 HBCU/HSI participants who received the highest essay scores. No incentives were offered to the GRE sample, since they did not write essays.

Results

Description of the Samples

Table 2 shows the composition of the two study samples. The HBCU/HSI sample, distributed relatively evenly among the schools listed in Appendix A, was comprised almost exclusively of minority students. The GRE sample, on the other hand, had a much smaller proportion of minority students. Female students were over-represented in both the HBCU/HSI and the GRE samples.

Table 2
Description of Samples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>HBCU/HSI Sample (n=253)</th>
<th>GRE Sample (n=268)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex (% female)</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican American</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Hispanic</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate Field</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Sciences</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities/Arts</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best Language (% English)</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Consistency of Ratings

As mentioned above, the study design required participants in the HBCU/HSI sample to rate six of the prompts at times about an hour and a half apart—once before writing the two essays and again afterwards. Agreement of the before and after ratings of the six prompts ranged from 75 to 81% when agreement was defined as exact or adjacent (that is, the same rating plus or minus 1 point on the 1 to 7 scale). Correlations among first and second ratings ranged from .41 to .55. Thus, as individuals, participants were not entirely consistent in their ratings. As a group, however, the participants rated the prompts quite consistently. Mean ratings were highly correlated (r = .86, .93, and .95 for the three samples). Finally, none of the mean ratings of the six “common set” prompts changed significantly as a result of participants having written essays on them.

Reactions to Prompts

Table 3 presents examples of the prompts that were rated as the highest and the lowest with regard to participants’ assessments of the quality of the essays they could write. (The mean ratings given to all prompts appear in Appendix B.) Table 3 gives some indication as to the kinds of prompts examinees may prefer: the highest-rated prompts seem to have a qualitatively different “feel” from the lowest-rated prompts.

Participants in the HBCU/HSI sample were asked to designate the prompt on which they thought they could write the best essay and also the one on which they would have the most difficulty writing a good essay from the set of prompts they rated before writing. They made a total of 245 comments about the “High Rated” prompts (those for which they thought they could write their strongest essays) and 228 comments on “Low Rated” prompts (those that they felt would pose the most difficulties). These responses are provided in Appendix C.

Generally, participants preferred prompts that they thought:

- They could relate to or identify with: I identify ... with the issue; I can relate to this topic because of personal experiences.

- Drew on personal experience, knowledge, or background: I have a substantial knowledge base to utilize; I have participated in many debates on this topic.

- Were clearly stated: [the topic] is clear and thought provoking; [the topic] is clear and simply stated.

- Elicited strong feelings, beliefs, or opinions: I am very passionate about [the topic]; I have strong opinions about this issue.

- Were interesting: A subject that deeply interests me.

Prompts that were singled out as being the most difficult to write about were described as:

- Uninteresting: I have no interest or experience with this topic; the topic does not trigger any interest at all.

- Unfamiliar: My knowledge of the subject is limited ... ; ... examples would be hard to find.
• Unclear/ambiguous: It's too vague; the topic itself was posed in a confusing manner.

• Evoking strong negative feelings or opinions: The topic goes against my own experiences and values; ... because of my background, I have mixed feelings about [this topic].

• Difficult to relate to ... not relevant in society today.

Table 3

Selected Examples of Highest and Lowest Rated Prompts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High Rated Prompts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;No other social organization can adequately fulfill the function of the family unit in society.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The character of a society can be measured by the character of the men and women that society chooses as its heroes.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Some people make a career choice based on such pragmatic considerations as the needs of the economy, the relative ease of finding a job, and the salary they can expect to make. Other people base their career choices on their natural talents and the enjoyment they expect to derive from their work.&quot; In your opinion, what is the best method of making a career choice?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Education should be equally devoted to enriching the personal lives of students and to training students to be productive workers.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Accepting new ideas is not difficult; what is difficult is letting go of the old ideas.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Societies all over the world are becoming more and more dependent on knowledge. In the twenty-first century, people will need to continue learning after they leave school.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Nearly every community or group of people deals with challenges it did not face a hundred years ago.&quot; Examine one challenge facing your community that earlier generations did not have to face.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Low Rated Prompts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The surest test of civilization is the condition of that part of society over which the other part has power.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Practicality is the great idol of the age, to which all powers must do service and all talents swear allegiance.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;An expert in any field hopes to produce work that will have a lasting influence. But the same expert must also focus on the contemporary impact of the work and respond to critics who argue from an opposing point of view. Even if the argument that rages today seems likely to become terribly dated in decades to come, it is the expert's job to address the critics' concerns, no matter how short-lived those concerns promise to be.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Art upsets; science reassures.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;You should test every theory by asking the question: 'If this theory is accepted, what tangible difference will it make to anyone?' Then you are in the best possible position for understanding what the theory means and for discussing its value.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2 All prompts were preceded by the following directions: In an essay, explore the implications of the statement below. Present your perspective on the issue, supporting it with reasons and examples drawn from areas such as your academic studies, your readings, and your own observations.
A majority of the comments (58% of those for high-rated prompts and 73% for low-rated prompts) could be classified according to several categories suggested here. The proportion in each category is shown in Table 4. As can be seen, the most frequent comments concerned (a) the favorable role of personal experience and (b) the extent to which the writer held strong personal opinions or beliefs about the topic. The most oft-cited reasons for difficulty writing on a topic were (a) lack of familiarity, knowledge, or appropriate background and (b) a perception that the topic was unclear or ambiguous.

Table 4

Participants’ Reasons for Designating Prompts as “Best” (Easiest to write a strong essay on) or “Most Difficult”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Best” Prompts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familiar with; drew on personal experiences, knowledge or observations</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had strong feelings or opinions about</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could relate to/identify with</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interesting</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearly stated</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Most Difficult” Prompts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfamiliar with/no knowledge of or background in</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear/ambiguous/abstract/too general</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uninteresting/unappealing</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree with/negative feelings or opinions about</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couldn’t relate to</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although, on average, some topics were viewed as easier to write about than others, there were significant differences among individuals. A prompt that one person designated as easiest to write about was sometimes regarded as the most difficult by another. For instance, one science-related prompt was viewed as a favorite by one writer (I have more examples than I can relate) but seen as problematic by another (I am not familiar with much of the information pertaining to this subject).

Participants also had varied opinions as to the role of their own beliefs and opinions. While it was quite common for participants to feel that they could write their best essays on topics about which they had strong positive feelings (I strongly believe in this statement), some also felt that they could write good essays on prompts that expressed beliefs with which they disagreed (Though I do not agree with the basic premise of the topic, I find it very interesting and full of possibilities and ideas to explore). It was far more common, however, for respondents to anticipate difficulty responding to prompts that elicited negative feelings (I cannot relate to the topic because I believe the total opposite of what the topic is stating; The statement does not reflect my personal views, thus making it difficult to argue this point). It is interesting to note that these reactions run counter to observations made by GRE essay readers, who report that some of the most compelling essays are written in response to prompts that evoke strong (but well-supported) negative feelings.
Some writers were troubled by topics that they regarded as too broad or insufficiently focused (see Appendix C). For example, some characterized the topic "Nothing is quite as it appears" as being too broad, lacking direction, ambiguous, and abstract. As one respondent put it, the topic "provides little direction and thus lends itself to responses which do the same." Others feared that they would waste time narrowing down the topic or deciding which of many possible approaches would appeal to essay scorers. Still others, however, liked topics that they regarded as broad because these allowed many different perspectives.

One clear finding is that opinions do vary about individual topics -- often quite dramatically. For instance, one topic ("Art upsets; science reassures") that was regarded as "too vague" by some was characterized by others as "clear and to the point." One writer disliked this topic because it was "too broad" and another because it was "too specific." Yet another writer favored it because it was "shortly stated, not biased like the others." In summary, whereas there is considerable diversity of opinion from one test taker to another, the study reveals some trends that provide essay prompt writers some additional insights into examinee reactions to various kinds of prompts and topics.

Generality of Examinee Reactions to Topics

One question of interest was the extent to which ratings of prompts were similar across the samples of study participants. The correlations of mean ratings between each of three study samples (or subsamples) are moderately high (Table 5), and an examination of the ratings did not reveal any systematic differences in agreement among the three samples.

Table 5

Correlations Between Mean Topic Ratings Across Samples
(by Questionnaire Form)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HBCU/HSI with GRE nonminority</td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HBCU/HSI with GRE minority</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRE minority with GRE nonminority</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. All correlations are significant, p<.01, two-tailed.

Table 6 shows the prompts for which ratings given by women were significantly different from those given by men. The number of statistically significant differences is not much greater than would be expected by chance, however, given the number of comparisons made. Furthermore, as can be seen, there was little consistency between the two samples with respect to the topics that men and women rated differently. Thus, we are not inclined to characterize those topics in terms of stable male/female preferences or experiences.
### Table 6

Topics Rated Significantly Different by Men and Women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rated Higher by Women (HBCU/HSI Sample)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;We all know what morality is: it is behaving as you were brought up to behave. To be moral is to obey the traditional maxims of your family and culture without hesitation or discussion.&quot;</td>
<td>1.02**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Nothing is quite as it appears.&quot;</td>
<td>.83*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;People are innately different; they lose their individuality when they seek to become like one another.&quot;</td>
<td>.83*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;A person from one culture has no right to judge the actions or values of a person from a different culture.&quot;</td>
<td>.60**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;It is through our identification with social groups that we define ourselves.&quot;</td>
<td>.45*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;In any field of endeavor -- the sciences, the humanities, the social sciences, industry, etc. -- it is not the attainment of a goal that matters, but rather the ideas and discoveries that are encountered on the way to the goal.&quot;</td>
<td>.33*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rated Higher by Men (HBCU/HSI Sample)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The needs of a community are essentially the needs of an individual multiplied many times over -- no more, no less.&quot;</td>
<td>.68*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Humanity has made little real progress over the past century or so. Technological innovations have taken place, but the overall condition of humanity is no better. Wars and violence still abound. Poverty is still with us. Our environment changes, but our nature remains the same. Technology cannot change the condition of humanity.&quot;</td>
<td>.43*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rated Higher by Women (GRE Sample)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Originality does not mean thinking something that was never thought before; it means putting old ideas together in new ways.&quot;</td>
<td>.74*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Only through mistakes can there be discovery or progress.&quot;</td>
<td>.64*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rated Higher by Men (GRE Sample)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Art upsets; science reassures.&quot;</td>
<td>.80*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The character of a society can be measured by the character of the men and women that society chooses as its heroes.&quot;</td>
<td>.77*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Peace -- whether between nations or within a community or family -- must be negotiated from a position of strength.&quot;</td>
<td>.75*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;With the growth of global networks in such areas as economics and communication, there is no doubt that every aspect of society -- including education, politics, the arts, and the sciences -- will benefit greatly from international influences.&quot;</td>
<td>.73*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The most elusive knowledge is self-knowledge, and it is usually acquired laboriously through experience outside, rather than inside, the classroom.&quot;</td>
<td>.72*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;What human beings really want is not knowledge, but certainty.&quot;</td>
<td>.71*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05, **p<.01
Correlates of Prompt Ratings

The participants' open-ended comments provide some clues to what may be salient features of GRE essay prompts. Using this feedback, the two principal investigators formally rated each of the 78 essay topics on three variables: (1) the degree to which the prompt seemed to elicit personal experiences (i.e., the extent to which a writer's personal experiences are likely to be immediately relevant to composing a response), (2) the extent to which it may be open to multiple interpretations, and (3) the degree to which it focuses on specific references or general concepts. Each of these qualities was rated independently by the two authors, after first discussing ratings on a subsample of the prompts (which were subsequently rerated independently).

The three qualities differed with respect to the reliability with which they were judged. For "elicits personal experiences," the correlation between the two raters ranged from .62 to .7 across the three forms of the survey instrument. For "openness to multiple interpretation" and "specific references vs. primarily conceptual," the comparable correlations ranged from .22 to .56 and from .46 to .82. Thus, interreader agreement was modest and inconsistent, especially for the latter two traits.

Each of the three ratings (summed over both raters) was subsequently compared with prompt ratings from the HBCU/HSI sample. The correlations of prompt ratings with the degree to which prompts were judged to elicit personal experiences ranged from .57 to .62 across survey forms (all significant at the .01 level or beyond). For "openness to multiple interpretations," participants' ratings of prompts correlated significantly (p<.05) for two forms (.39 and .54), but not for the third (.13): participants generally thought they could write better essays on topics that we judged to have only a single likely interpretation. Ratings of the degree to which prompts contained specific references instead of only general concepts did not correlate significantly with participants' judgments of topics.

Correlation between Prompt Ratings and Essay Performance

Table 7 shows -- for each of six prompts -- the mean prompt ratings and mean essay scores for the HBCU/HSI sample, along with the mean essay pretest scores when the prompts were later pretested in a national GRE test administration. Performance on these six prompts was very consistent across the two samples (r = .97 between means). The relationship between mean topic ratings and mean performance, however, was not statistically significant (r = .28, n = 6). Note, for example, that the HBCU/HSI sample performed best on prompts that they rated only third and fifth out of six.

What about the relationship of prompt ratings to essay scores for individuals? Table 8 shows the correlations between individuals' ratings and their performance for each prompt. Only for two of the prompts was there a statistically significant relationship (p<.05) between topic rating and essay score (r = .34 and .35). Generally, then, ratings were not predictive of writing performance.
### Table 7

Mean Ratings and Mean Scores on Six Essay Prompts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Mean Topic Rating HBCU/HSI Sample</th>
<th>Mean Score HBCU/HSI Sample</th>
<th>Mean Score Pretest Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Only through mistakes can there be discovery or progress.”</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It is through our identification with social groups that we define ourselves.”</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Humanity has made little real progress over the past century or so. Technological innovations have taken place, but the overall condition of humanity is no better. Wars and violence still abound. Poverty is still with us. Our environment changes, but our nature remains the same. Technology cannot change the condition of humanity.”</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“In any field of endeavor -- the sciences, the humanities, the social sciences, industry, etc. -- it is not the attainment of a goal that matters, but rather the ideas and discoveries that are encountered on the way to the goal.”</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“With the growth of global networks in such areas as economics and communication, there is no doubt that every aspect of society -- including education, politics, the arts, and the sciences -- will benefit greatly from international influences.”</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It is through the use of logic and of precise, careful measurement that we become aware of our progress. Without such tools, we have no reference points to indicate how far we have advanced or retreated.”</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 8
Correlations of Topic Ratings with Essay Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essay Score</th>
<th>Topic Rating</th>
<th>Correlation Between Score and Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>sd</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| "It is through our identification with social groups that we define ourselves." | 90 | 3.6 | 0.9 | 5.4 | 1.1 | .34* |
| "In any field of endeavor -- the sciences, the humanities, the social sciences, industry, etc. -- it is not the attainment of a goal that matters, but rather the ideas and discoveries that are encountered on the way to the goal." | 85 | 3.5 | 1.0 | 4.9 | 1.2 | -.06 |
| "It is through the use of logic and of precise, careful measurement that we become aware of our progress. Without such tools, we have no reference points to indicate how far we have advanced or retreated." | 89 | 3.4 | 0.9 | 4.5 | 1.3 | -.05 |
| "With the growth of global networks in such areas as economics and communication, there is no doubt that every aspect of society -- including education, politics, the arts, and the sciences -- will benefit greatly from international influences." | 82 | 3.8 | 1.0 | 4.8 | 1.2 | .35* |
| "Only through mistakes can there be discovery or progress." | 78 | 3.6 | 0.9 | 5.6 | 1.1 | .01 |
| "Humanity has made little real progress over the past century or so. Technological innovations have taken place, but the overall condition of humanity is no better. Wars and violence still abound. Poverty is still with us. Our environment changes, but our nature remains the same. Technology cannot change the condition of humanity." | 70 | 3.8 | 0.8 | 5.3 | 1.3 | -.15 |

*p<.01
Is the difference between the quality of the essays written on two prompts related to the difference between a writer’s rating of the two prompts? Table 9 compares performances on writers’ higher- and lower-rated prompts. For the 68 participants who wrote on two topics that they had given the same rating, there was, as would be expected, no difference (-.04) in performance on one topic vs. the other. As the difference between the ratings of the two prompts increased, however, the average difference between essay scores also tended to increase. For example, for the 22 people who wrote on pairs of topics that they rated as 3 units apart on the 7-point rating scale (e.g., 7 and 4, 6 and 3, etc.), the mean difference in performance on the two prompts was .27. With small samples at each level, none of the differences in performance was statistically significant. The trend, however, was consistent: the difference in performance increased slightly as differences in ratings increased.

Table 9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difference in Ratings</th>
<th>Higher-Rated Prompt</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Lower-Rated Prompt</th>
<th>Mean Difference in Performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No difference</td>
<td>m 3.58</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>m 3.62</td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sd 0.93</td>
<td></td>
<td>sd 1.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>m 3.60</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>m 3.67</td>
<td>-.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sd 0.94</td>
<td></td>
<td>sd 0.86</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>m 3.70</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>m 3.55</td>
<td>+.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sd 0.94</td>
<td></td>
<td>sd 0.89</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>m 3.95</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>m 3.68</td>
<td>+.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sd 1.02</td>
<td></td>
<td>sd 0.91</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>m 3.90</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>m 3.60</td>
<td>+.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sd 0.80</td>
<td></td>
<td>sd 0.58</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>m 4.50</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>m 3.50</td>
<td>+1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sd 0.00</td>
<td></td>
<td>sd 0.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>m 3.75</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>m 2.75</td>
<td>+1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sd 0.25</td>
<td></td>
<td>sd 1.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. None of the mean differences was statistically significant.

Correlates of Performance on Higher- vs. Lower-rated Prompts

Is there any indication that examinees’ assessments of prompts may foreshadow the validity of essay scores based on these prompts? To shed light on this question, we computed the correlations between participants’ standing on several non-test indicators of writing skill and their scores on (a) the essay written on the higher-rated prompt and (b) the essay written on the lower-rated prompt. The non-test indicators included:
- Self-comparisons with peers: "How do you think your writing compares with that of other students in your major field?" (Well above average, somewhat above average, about average, somewhat below average, well below average.)

- Overall undergraduate grade-point average.

- Undergraduate grade-point average (self-reported) in courses that required at least some writing.

- Grade on the most recent assignment for which a written report was required.

Two other indices were also used to collect self-reported data on participants' reported writing success. These indices, which used a 5-point scale ranging from a high of 5 ("Extremely Successful") to a low of 1 ("Not at all Successful"), were based on an instrument developed by Ward and Carlson (1984). They measure student success with various:

- writing activities (e.g., thinking about writing assignments, organizing ideas and information, revising, and developing an effective writing style)

- kinds of writing (e.g., personal, creative, persuasive, analytical/critical, descriptive, expository, examination writing, and applied writing)

Table 10 shows that the pattern of correlations was similar for higher- and lower-rated essays. An exception was that the higher-rated essay in the pair correlated significantly higher (p<.05) with participants' self-assessments of their writing skills.

### Table 10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-Test Indicator</th>
<th>Higher-Rated Prompts</th>
<th>Lower-Rated Prompts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-comparison with peers</td>
<td>.39**</td>
<td>.22**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall UGPA</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>.26**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPA in writing courses</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>.31**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade on recent writing</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>.32**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing activities</td>
<td>.20**</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinds of writing</td>
<td>.24**</td>
<td>.21**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Total n was 178. Correlations are based on ns of 148 to 169.

*p<.05, two-tailed, **p<.01, two-tailed.
Discussion

A major shortcoming of many performance assessments that require extended examinee responses is their limited generalizability from one task to another (Linn, 1993; Shavelson, Baxter, & Pine, 1992): an individual examinee's performance is often highly dependent on the particular task that is posed. This is also true for essay tests of writing skill (Breland, Camp, Jones, Morris, & Rock, 1987), and it seems to apply not only to different tasks but also to different topics for the same task. Because performance tasks are typically time-consuming, the number of tasks that can be feasibly administered is usually small; often only one is administered. Under these constraints, it is difficult to ensure that such assessments are comparable and therefore fair to all groups and individuals.

The study reported here was designed to determine the extent to which the perceptions of test takers themselves might be of value in developing GRE essay prompts that are comparable. To this end, we gathered potential GRE test takers' impressions of a sizable set of essay prompts that have been developed for possible use in a GRE writing test. The main thrust of the effort was to better understand (from the perspective of test takers in general and minority test takers in particular) possible sources of difficulty associated with the prompts.

Thus, the primary strategy was to ask prospective GRE test takers to predict how strong an essay they thought they could write on each of a variety of prompts. We found that, individually, study participants were only moderately consistent with respect to the numerical ratings they assigned to essay prompts. This may suggest either a lack of strong opinions about essay topics or some uncertainty regarding likely performance on essays written on the prompts. However, when asked to designate and characterize the particular essay prompts that would be most likely to elicit the strongest and weakest essays, study participants cited some factors more often than others. Two in particular were (a) the degree to which writers were knowledgeable about a topic or had had personal experiences related to it and (b) the extent to which writers thought that a prompt was clearly stated. When these prompt features were formally coded by the investigators, the extent to which topics were judged as allowing writers to draw on their personal experiences was relatively strongly related to the writers' predictions of the quality of the essays they could write on various topics. This is also the finding of prior research on this variable (Greenberg, 1981).

Although study participants did have opinions about the various prompts and about their ability to write effective essays on them, we found only a weak and inconsistent relationship between writers' predictions and the quality of the essays they actually wrote. Previous research has also failed to detect any strong relationship between test takers' opinions and their performance on essay prompts (Powers, Fowles, Farnum, & Gerritz, 1992; Schaeffer, 1993, as cited by Hamp-Lyons & Kroll, 1997).

Furthermore, the relationship of essay quality to several non-test indicators of writing skill was essentially the same when study participants wrote on higher-rated and lower-rated prompts. (An exception was that the relationship between essay quality and participants' own assessment of their writing skills was significantly stronger when writing on a preferred topic. An adequate explanation of this exception may require further study.)
Implications

At the most general level, the study results provide additional representation of minority students in the development and piloting of the new GRE writing measure. This representation is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for ensuring the fairness of the new measure, and it is consistent with the Board's efforts to infuse a FAME (fairness, access, multiculturalism, and equity) perspective into the development of its new tests and services. The examinee perspective provided by the “voices” of the minority students who participated in the study will prove useful, we hope, to test developers as they write, revise, and select prompts that are accessible to all who take the GRE writing test. Specifically, the comments and ratings provided by study participants may have utility for establishing an appropriate variety of topics in the pool of writing prompts. A greater awareness of examinee preferences may also increase the likelihood of developing prompts that will survive formal pretesting. (We did observe informally, for a small number of prompts, a very tenuous relation between examinee reactions and the likelihood that a prompt would survive pretesting.) Furthermore, the study results seem to suggest that gathering examinee perceptions of potential topics might constitute a useful and relatively inexpensive way to screen topics before subjecting them to formal pretesting. At the least, this kind of student input might supplement traditional pretesting.

With regard to fairness, the study results do not suggest that considering examinee opinions in the development process will make the various writing prompts more comparable. However, like “prescribing chicken soup for a cold,” taking test takers’ perceptions into account certainly can’t hurt.

One specific way in which test taker input might come into play is in developing the choice of prompts offered to examinees. Currently, the proposed GRE writing test model specifies that test takers will have a choice of essay prompts on which to write. Like previous efforts (Powers et al., 1992), the results of the current study clearly show that reactions to any single prompt can, and typically will, vary dramatically from examinee to examinee: a prompt that is considered interesting and engaging by one test taker will be regarded by another as uninspiring. The strong role that personal experience seems to play in determining examinee reactions to essay prompts may be key in pairing the topics from which examinees may choose. One strategy under consideration by GRE writing test developers is to couple prompts judged to relate to very different kinds of personal experience, the objective being to maximize the chances that test takers would have had experience related to at least one of the prompts and to minimize the probability that they would have had no experience with either one. The results of this study support such a strategy.

The study results also suggest that test takers need good advice about the choices they make. For instance, one finding was that examinees are often skeptical about their ability to write strong essays on topics about which they have strong negative feelings. Yet, anecdotal evidence from essay scorers suggests that this skepticism may be unwarranted: reportedly, some of the most “compelling” essays are written on topics that engender negative reactions. Perhaps pre-examination familiarization materials and test registration bulletins could offer advice on how to approach prompts examinees regard as less than desirable. The most appropriate message to GRE test takers could be that “Your first impressions of essay topics may not be as important as you may think in determining your test performance. Don’t be ‘turned off’ by topics that are not personally appealing to you, either because of your opinions, background, or previous experiences. Instead, suspend your judgment, at least temporarily, until you have considered the topic from various perspectives and sketched out some ideas about how to respond.”
In summary, this study has, we hope, contributed to the GRE program’s goal of offering a graduate test of writing ability that is not only useful, but fair and equitable as well.
References


Appendix A

Colleges and Universities Participating in the Study
Colleges and Universities Participating in the Study

Fayetteville State University
Fayetteville, NC

Florida A&M University
Tallahassee, FL

Fort Lewis College
Durango, CO

Hampton University
Hampton, VA

Herbert H. Lehman College
Bronx, NY

Jackson State University
Jackson, MS

University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, NM

North Carolina Central University
Durham, NC

University of Puerto Rico
Rio Piedras Campus
San Juan, PR

San Diego State University
San Diego, CA

Sul Ross State University
Alpine, TX

Texas A & M
Kingsville Campus
Kingsville, TX

Texas Southern University
Houston, TX

University of Texas, Pan American
Edinburg, TX

Tuskegee Institute
Tuskegee, AL
Appendix B

Mean Ratings of Essay Prompts by Survey Form
Table B.1
Mean Ratings of Essay Prompts by Two Samples (Form A)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prompt</th>
<th>HBCU/HSI Sample (N=88)</th>
<th>GRE Sample Minority (N=23)</th>
<th>Non-Minority Sample (N=69)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;A person from one culture has no right to judge the actions or values of a person from a different culture.&quot;</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;No other social organization can adequately fulfill the function of the family unit in society.&quot;</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Only through mistakes can there be discovery or progress.&quot;</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The purpose of education should be to provide students with a value system, a standard, a set of ideas -- not to prepare them for a job.&quot;</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The character of a society can be measured by the character of the men and women that society chooses as its heroes.&quot;</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The study of an academic discipline alters the way we perceive everyday life. Before studying the discipline and after it, we see the same life, but with different eyes.&quot;</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Humanity has made little real progress over the past century or so. Technological innovations have taken place, but the overall condition of humanity is no better. Wars and violence still abound. Poverty is still with us. Our environment changes, but our nature remains the same. Technology cannot change the condition of humanity.&quot;</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;It is through our identification with social groups that we define ourselves.&quot;</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;What is considered ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ often reflects the unexamined beliefs and preconceptions that a person receives uncritically while growing up.”</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;As long as people in a society are hungry or out of work or lack the basic skills needed to survive, the use of public resources to support the arts is frivolous -- and, perhaps, even cruel -- when one considers all the potential uses of such money.”</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;We live in terrible times, yet I would not want to live in any other.&quot;</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Both development of technological tools in recent centuries and the uses to which humanity has put them have led to modern civilizations in which loneliness and violence are ever increasing.”</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;What is called human nature is really a reflection of the human condition: if all people had a reasonable share of territory and resources, such evil products of ‘human nature’ as war and crime would become extremely rare.”</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Standard deviations ranged from 1.0 to 1.7.

b Standard deviations ranged from 1.1 to 1.9.

c Standard deviations ranged from 1.2 to 1.8.
Table B.1 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prompt</th>
<th>HBCU/HSI Sample (N=88)</th>
<th>GRE Sample Minority (N=23)</th>
<th>Non-Minority (N=69)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Our choices in everything -- the friends whose company we keep, our academic interests, even the foods we eat and the clothes we wear -- reflect our political viewpoints.&quot;</td>
<td>5.0 *</td>
<td>4.4 b</td>
<td>3.9 c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;In any field of endeavor -- the sciences, the humanities, the social sciences, industry, etc. -- it is not the attainment of a goal that matters, but rather the ideas and discoveries that are encountered on the way to the goal.&quot;</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;With the growth of global networks in such areas as economics and communication, there is no doubt that every aspect of society -- including education, politics, the arts, and the sciences -- will benefit greatly from international influences.&quot;</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The needs of a community are essentially the needs of an individual multiplied many times over -- no more, no less.&quot;</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Scandals -- whether in politics, academia, or other areas -- can be useful. They focus our attention on problems in ways that no speaker or reformer ever could.&quot;</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;It is a common practice in debating societies for speakers simply to be told which position they are to take. Their own beliefs are not considered relevant. I have never done this in any situation and I never will. I may not always be right, but I care passionately about what is true and I never say anything that I do not believe to be right.&quot;</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is a common practice to attach ‘ism’ to the end of a word in order to label a particular movement, attitude, or trend. Such terms abound in almost every sphere of life -- society, politics, the arts, philosophy, the sciences, and so on. Choose -- or, if you prefer -- invent -- one such ‘ism’ define it, and explain why you believe it is significant. Support your view with reasons and examples from your own experience, your observation of others, or your reading.</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The human mind is always trying to make analogies. We are compulsively drawn to see meaning in slight similarities between very different things, even when it is unhelpful or even harmful to do so.&quot;</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Nothing is quite as it appears.&quot;</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;It is through the use of logic and of precise, careful measurement that we become aware of our progress. Without such tools, we have no reference points to indicate how far we have advanced or retreated.&quot;</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Progress in academic disciplines is a triumph over the prejudices of tradition.&quot;</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Standard deviations ranged from 1.0 to 1.7.

b Standard deviations ranged from 1.1 to 1.9.

c Standard deviations ranged from 1.2 to 1.8.
"Through the ages, the function of art has not been to keep pace with science and technology but rather to provide an escape from these forces."

"The absence of choice is a circumstance that is very, very rare."

"Most national issues are actually international issues. For example, the polluted rain that destroys the lakes and forests of one country often has its origins in a distant country. The best way to deal with such global issues is through a world organization in which the majority of nations would force a nation to stop polluting or else face severe international consequences."

"Science produces physical interpretations of raw data, of hard data. Thus science, unlike every other human endeavor, is not itself biased, is not culture-specific and bounded."

"The surest test of civilization is the condition of that part of society over which the other part has power."

"Practicality is the great idol of the age, to which all powers must do service and all talents swear allegiance."

**Table B.1 (continued)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prompt</th>
<th>HBCU/HSI Sample (N=88)</th>
<th>GRE Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Through the ages, the function of art has not been to keep pace with science and technology but rather to provide an escape from these forces.&quot;</td>
<td>4.5 (^a)</td>
<td>4.6 (^b) 4.2 (^c)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The absence of choice is a circumstance that is very, very rare.&quot;</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Most national issues are actually international issues. For example, the polluted rain that destroys the lakes and forests of one country often has its origins in a distant country. The best way to deal with such global issues is through a world organization in which the majority of nations would force a nation to stop polluting or else face severe international consequences.&quot;</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Science produces physical interpretations of raw data, of hard data. Thus science, unlike every other human endeavor, is not itself biased, is not culture-specific and bounded.&quot;</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The surest test of civilization is the condition of that part of society over which the other part has power.&quot;</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Practicality is the great idol of the age, to which all powers must do service and all talents swear allegiance.&quot;</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Standard deviations ranged from 1.0 to 1.7.

\(^b\) Standard deviations ranged from 1.1 to 1.9.

\(^c\) Standard deviations ranged from 1.2 to 1.8.
Table B.2
Mean Ratings of Essay Prompts by Two Samples (Form B)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prompt</th>
<th>HBCU/HSI Sample (N=86)</th>
<th>GRE Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Some people make a career choice based on such pragmatic considerations as the needs of the economy, the relative ease of finding a job, and the salary they can expect to make. Other people base their career choices on their natural talents and the enjoyment they expect to derive from their work.&quot; In your opinion, what is the best method of making a career choice? Explain, providing relevant reasons from your experiences, observations, or reading.</td>
<td>6.1*</td>
<td>5.8b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Education should be equally devoted to enriching the personal lives of students and to training students to be productive workers.&quot;</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Accepting new ideas is not difficult; what is difficult is letting go of the old ideas.&quot;</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Children are the parents of women and men; how children are socialized today determines the destiny of our society. Unfortunately, we have not yet learned how to raise children who can help bring about a better society.&quot;</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Only through mistakes can there be discovery or progress.&quot;</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The best preparation for life is not learning to be competitive, but learning to be cooperative.&quot;</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The most elusive knowledge is self-knowledge, and it is usually acquired laboriously through experience outside, rather than inside, the classroom.&quot;</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;It is through our identification with social groups that we define ourselves.&quot;</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;One person's ideas can change the course of history.&quot;</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The study of an academic discipline alters the way we perceive the world. Before studying the discipline and after it, we see the same world, but with different eyes.&quot;</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Humanity has made little real progress over the past century or so. Technological innovations have taken place, but the overall condition of humanity is no better. Wars and violence still abound. Poverty is still with us. Our environment changes, but our nature remains the same. Technology cannot change the condition of humanity.&quot;</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Standard deviations ranged from 1.0 to 1.5.

b Standard deviations ranged from 1.3 to 2.1.

c Standard deviations ranged from 1.3 to 1.8.
Table B.2 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prompt</th>
<th>HBCU/HSI Sample (N=86)</th>
<th>Minority Sample (N=18)</th>
<th>Non-Minority Sample (N=69)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The world if full of contradictions.&quot;</td>
<td>5.2*</td>
<td>5.1 b</td>
<td>4.1 c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Legislation cannot solve many problems of modern society: moral</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>behavior cannot be legislated.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;People think that if a thing can be done, then it ought to be</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>done, and that if something has been invented, then we must use it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>We seldom stop to think of the possible consequences.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;The increase in 'instant' commodities in recent decades has</td>
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<tr>
<td>demonstrated that time is indeed elastic. Instant foods, instant</td>
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<tr>
<td>communication, faster transportation—all are evidence that time is</td>
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<tr>
<td>being compressed. Whatever humanity gains from this speed-up, a loss</td>
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<tr>
<td>must also be noted. Instead of more leisure time becoming available,</td>
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<tr>
<td>the pace of human affairs is more rushed, more hectic, more frantic</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>than ever before.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Our declining environment may bring the people of the world</td>
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<tr>
<td>together as no politician, philosopher, or war ever could. Environmental problems are global in scope and respect no nation's boundaries. Therefore, people are faced with the choice of unity and cooperation on the one hand or disunity and a common tragedy on the other.&quot;</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;What we call progress is a matter of exchanging one problem for</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>another.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;The arts (painting, music, literature, etc.) reveal the otherwise</td>
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<tr>
<td>hidden ideas and impulses of a society.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;In any field of endeavor -- the sciences, the humanities, the social</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sciences, industry, etc. -- it is not the attainment of a goal that</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>matters, but rather the ideas and discoveries that are encountered on the way to the goal.&quot;</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;With the growth of global networks in such areas as economics and</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>communication, there is no doubt that every aspect of society --</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>including education, politics, the arts, and the sciences -- will</td>
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<tr>
<td>benefit greatly from international influences.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Unlike great thinkers and great artists, the most effective political</td>
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<tr>
<td>leaders often yield to public opinion and abandon principle for the</td>
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<tr>
<td>sake of compromise.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Those who treat politics and morality as though they were separate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>realms fail to understand either the one or the other.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Standard deviations ranged from 1.0 to 1.5.

b Standard deviations ranged from 1.3 to 2.1.

c Standard deviations ranged from 1.3 to 1.8.
Table B.2 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prompt</th>
<th>HBCU/HSI Sample (N=86)</th>
<th>GRE Sample Minority (N=18)</th>
<th>GRE Sample Non-Minority (N=69)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“The way you interpret the materials you work with in your academic</td>
<td>4.5 a</td>
<td>4.8 b</td>
<td>4.1 c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>field is more a matter of temperament than of training. Different</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interpretations come about when people with different temperaments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>look at exactly the same objects, facts, data, or events and see</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>different things.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“In our time, specialists of all kinds are highly overrated. We need</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>more generalists — people who can provide broad perspectives.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“What human beings really want is not knowledge, but certainty.”</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It is through the use of logic and of precise, careful measurement</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>that we become aware of our progress. Without such tools, we have no</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reference points to indicate how far we have advanced or retreated.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The university community consists of three different worlds — the</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sciences, the humanities, and the social sciences. Each world operates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on its own assumptions and has its own special habits of thinking.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People from one are incapable of communicating clearly with people</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>from either of the other two. Rarely is there meaningful interaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>among the sciences, the humanities, and the social sciences.”</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“An expert in any field hopes to produce work that will have a lasting</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>influence. But the same expert must also focus on the contemporary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>impact of the work and respond to critics who argue from an opposing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>point of view. Even if the argument that rages today seems likely to</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>become terribly dated in decades to come, it is the expert's job to</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>address the critics' concerns, no matter how short-lived those concerns</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>promise to be.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Art upsets; science reassures.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Standard deviations ranged from 1.0 to 1.5.

b Standard deviations ranged from 1.3 to 2.1.

c Standard deviations ranged from 1.3 to 1.8.
Table B.3
Mean Ratings of Essay Prompts by Two Samples (Form C)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prompt</th>
<th>HBCU/HSI Sample (N=83)</th>
<th>GRE Sample Minority (N=19)</th>
<th>Non-Minority (N=69)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;It is through our identification with social groups that we define</td>
<td>5.9 *</td>
<td>4.8 b</td>
<td>5.5 c</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| ourselves."
| "Societies all over the world are becoming more and more dependent on  | 5.8                      | 5.4                         | 5.5                 |
| knowledge. In the twenty-first century, people will need to continue   |                         |                             |                     |
| learning after they leave school."                                    |                         |                             |                     |
| "True success can be judged in only one way, by one person. There are  | 5.7                      | 4.8                         | 5.2                 |
| no way external indicators by which true success can be                |                         |                             |                     |
| demonstrated. Success is achieved by meeting those standards that      |                         |                             |                     |
| one sets for oneself."                                                |                         |                             |                     |
| Nearly every community or group of people deals with challenges it did  | 5.6                      | 5.4                         | 5.9                 |
| not face a hundred years ago. Examine one challenge facing your        |                         |                             |                     |
| community that earlier generations did not have to face.              |                         |                             |                     |
| "The way people look, dress, and act reveals their attitudes and       | 5.6                      | 4.4                         | 5.3                 |
| interests. You can tell much about a society's ideas and feelings by    |                         |                             |                     |
| observing the outward characteristics of its people."                 |                         |                             |                     |
| "Rituals and ceremonies help define a culture. Without them, societies | 5.5                      | 4.6                         | 5.1                 |
| or groups of people have a diminished sense of who they are."         |                         |                             |                     |
| "People are innately different; they lose their individuality when    | 5.5                      | 4.9                         | 4.7                 |
| they seek to become like one another."                                 |                         |                             |                     |
| "Technology is a necessary but not always a positive force in modern   | 5.4                      | 5.4                         | 5.7                 |
| life."                                                                |                         |                             |                     |
| "Law should not be stationary and fixed. It should be flexible enough   | 5.4                      | 4.9                         | 4.7                 |
| to take account of various circumstances, times, and places."         |                         |                             |                     |
| "Knowledge of the past does not prevent people from making mistakes;   | 5.4                      | 4.8                         | 4.7                 |
| it only allows them to recognize when a mistake has been made."       |                         |                             |                     |
| "We all know what morality is: it is behaving as you were brought up   | 5.3                      | 5.1                         | 5.0                 |
| to behave. To be moral is to obey the traditional maxims of your family|                         |                             |                     |
| and culture without hesitation or discussion."                        |                         |                             |                     |
| "Only through mistakes can there be discovery or progress."           | 5.3                      | 5.0                         | 4.9                 |
| "Success comes more often from taking chances or risks than from      | 5.3                      | 4.9                         | 5.0                 |
| careful and cautious planning."                                       |                         |                             |                     |
| "Humanity has made little real progress over the past century or so.   | 5.1                      | 5.0                         | 5.1                 |
| Technological innovations have taken place, but the overall condition  |                         |                             |                     |
| of humanity is no better. Wars and violence still abound. Poverty is   |                         |                             |                     |
| still with us. Our environment changes, but our nature remains the     |                         |                             |                     |
| same. Technology cannot change the condition of humanity."           |                         |                             |                     |

* Standard deviations ranged from 1.0 to 1.6.

b Standard deviations ranged from 1.0 to 1.8.

c Standard deviations ranged from 1.2 to 1.7.
Table B.3 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prompt</th>
<th>HBCU/HSI Sample</th>
<th>GRE Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(N=83)</td>
<td>Minorit-y (N=19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Peace -- whether between nations or within a community or family --</td>
<td>5.1 *</td>
<td>4.2 b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>must be negotiated from a position of strength.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Originality does not mean thinking something that was never thought</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>before; it means putting old ideas together in new ways.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We owe all of our knowledge not to people who have agreed, but to</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>people who have disagreed.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Progress is best made through discussion among people who have</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contrasting points of view.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“So much is new and complex today that looking back for an</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>understanding of the past provides little guidance for living in the</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>present.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Most of the environmental problems we face result from advances in</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>technology. In order to solve these problems, however, further</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>advances in technology are necessary.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Critical judgment of work in any given field has little value unless</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it comes from someone who is an expert in that field.”</td>
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<td>“In any field of endeavor -- the sciences, the humanities, the social</td>
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<td>sciences, industry, etc. -- it is not the attainment of a goal that</td>
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<td>matters, but rather the ideas and discoveries that are encountered on</td>
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<td>the way to the goal.”</td>
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<td>communication, there is no doubt that every aspect of society --</td>
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<td>including education, politics, the arts, and the sciences -- will</td>
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<td>benefit greatly from international influences.”</td>
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<td>“It is impossible for any society -- or any large organized group of</td>
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<td>people -- to maximize both the freedom and the equality of people.</td>
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<td>Any steps taken to insure liberty will surely create inequality, and</td>
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<td>any steps taken to promote equality will occur only at the expense of</td>
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<td>liberty.”</td>
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<td>“The material progress, security, and peace of one country are</td>
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<td>necessarily connected to the material progress, security, and peace</td>
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<td>of all other countries.”</td>
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<td>“The goal of politics should not be the pursuit of an ideal, but rather</td>
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<td>the search for common ground and reasonable consensus.”</td>
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a Standard deviations ranged from 1.0 to 1.6.
b Standard deviations ranged from 1.0 to 1.8.
c Standard deviations ranged from 1.2 to 1.7.
Table B.3 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prompt</th>
<th>HBCU/HSI Sample (N=83)</th>
<th>GRE Sample</th>
<th>Non-Minority (N=69)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“What is considered ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ often reflects the unexamined beliefs and preconceptions that a person receives uncritically while growing up.”</td>
<td>4.5 *</td>
<td>4.6 \textsuperscript{b}</td>
<td>4.8 \textsuperscript{c}</td>
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<tr>
<td>“It is through the use of logic and of precise, careful measurement that we become aware of our progress. Without such tools, we have no reference points to indicate how far we have advanced or retreated.”</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>“The extinction of the dinosaurs millions of years before the existence of human beings shows that the extinction of an animal species is a normal phenomenon in the natural world. Thus, society should not make extraordinary efforts, especially at a great cost in money and jobs, to save endangered species.”</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>“You should test every theory by asking the question: ‘If this theory is accepted, what tangible difference will it make to anyone?’ Then you are in the best possible position for understanding what the theory means and for discussing its value.”</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.7</td>
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\* Standard deviations ranged from 1.0 to 1.6.

\textsuperscript{b} Standard deviations ranged from 1.0 to 1.8.

\textsuperscript{c} Standard deviations ranged from 1.2 to 1.7.
Appendix C

Participants’ Reasons for Thinking They Could
Write their Best Essays on Topics
Participants' Comments on Essay Prompts

FORM A

1. We live in terrible times, yet I would not want to live in any other.

Reasons for “strongest”:

I most strongly identify with the statement and I could write a very good essay on it. Examples wouldn't be hard to find.

Because I would use my personal experiences I went through and heard from the past.

It relates to an area that I feel more strongly about discussing.

I guess because of my age at the present time, for the horrible things that I have experienced, yet, I am happy to be alive.

Because it is clear and simply stated. And because it is a topic one thinks and talks about often. So, I would have a lot of statements to make and several examples to support my position.

2. Most national issues are actually international issues. For example, the polluted rain that destroys the lakes and forests of one country often has its origins in a distant country. The best way to deal with such global issues is through a world organization in which the majority of nations would force a nation to stop polluting or else face severe international consequences.

Reasons for “strongest”:

I could express my knowledge about some of these issues, present examples and names of some of these organizations.

Reasons for “weakest”:

I don't know much about the subject matter.

I would have difficulty writing about this because I do not have enough background information of national issues to determine whether they are actually international issues.

Although pollution is an issue in the media with oil spills and the ozone layer problem, I am not exposed to the topic as much as I am exposed to problems dealing with society and the individual. Therefore my knowledge on the subject is limited.

It would cause difficulty because it would probably require to know some truth about the nature and population affecting us in our earth.

I know a little about these topics but I don't feel I have the knowledge needed to write a good essay.

I am not well informed about pollution problems out of my country.

I'd look at such global issues and try to formulate a conclusion or even a solution, requires in depth knowledge of the micro-organizations from minerals to humankind, which I could not write about without researching answers.
It deals with a subject that I have little knowledge and no interest in.

I don't have enough information about national or international issues in my memory to write about.

Because I don't relate as well as I should to national issues.

3. It is through our identification with social groups that we define ourselves.

Reasons for “strongest”:

A direct correlation with one's self along with other examples can be used to make an effective essay.

This is interesting to me, because I stand on the premise that you should know who you are before you become a member of an organization to find yourself.

Because I identify myself with the issue and I have had class discussions about the problem.

Is a subject that deeply interests me. The way and reason why people define and categorize themselves is a subject that needs to be addressed.

Because I'm Native American and I view the world through native eyes.

I selected this topic because of the truth in it.

I find that this topic is more interesting in that the issue of social groups has been an issue or subject for discussion in my class.

Reasons for “weakest”:

I would not have difficulty writing on this subject but I am least interested in this particular subject.

I believe that this topic is too ambiguous.

I am ignorant on other peoples social groups and social preferences. Socialism is vast in this country as well as other countries.

4. Practicality is the great idol of the age, to which all powers must do service and all talents swear allegiance.

Reasons for “weakest”:

My knowledge of the subject is limited and therefore I could not write a very thoughtful essay.

For me, practicality and necessity are not the same things, and therefore to differentiate could be difficult.

It would take more time to just determine what the topic actually means.

Because the topic is neutral to me and I have never thought about that.
I feel this essay would be difficult because I would not know where to start and I probably could not discuss any relevant material.

I believe the topic is somewhat abstract and I am not a person who dwells on abstract ideals.

It is "abstract" to me, not tangible.

The topic goes against my own experiences and values. I would not be able to write a good essay on such a topic.

Practicality is a Western term, defined by westerners, it is not a concept that natives aspire to.

Because I don't get the feeling of what actually is being asked in this question or statement.

The topic seems rather vague. I'm not sure if I agree with the notion that is being made by the topic.

I have no idea what the topic means.

In my opinion, this is a rather vague premise. It bares too many options to adequately form a concrete opinion.

Hard for me to think of supporting reasons.

The topic does not interest me at all.

I do not have enough knowledge or experience to write a good essay.

The topic is difficult because it is too general and a bit confusing. It is practical to wage war against another over a portion of dry land or to make peace with another who is known to be a killer of hundreds, who has himself waged war against you.

I don't understand the topic.

I think that this topic would be most difficult because I don't understand exactly what it says (mean).

Because the phrasing of the topic is so elaborate that one has to ponder over its meaning first, and then, work on one's statement.

I'm not interested in economics nor politics.

5. The absence of choice is a circumstance that is very, very rare.

Reasons for “strongest”:

I am very passionate about each individual having the right to choose whatever suits him as long as it doesn't affect others' rights. Although one might believe absence of choice is rare.

Because I believe that people have a lot of choices in life, we just have to know which choices are the best ones.

This topic has concrete subject meaning that I can relate to.

Reasons for “weakest”:

I thought that number five was the most difficult because it is not a well developed idea.
6. In any field of endeavor — the sciences, the humanities, the social sciences, industry, etc. — it is not
the attainment of a goal that matters, but rather the ideas and discoveries that are encountered on the
way to the goal.

Reasons for “strongest”:

I chose this topic because I believe it to be true not only in academic fields or disciplines but in daily life
as well.

Because it reflects the way I would feel.

This topic addresses an issue which I have been thinking about myself. I have many opinions and
experiences with this topic.

These are the same principles my fraternity was built upon.

Reasons for “weakest”:

I am not fond of the topic.

7. Science produces physical interpretations of raw data, of hard data. Thus science, unlike every other
human endeavor, is not itself biased, is not culture-specific and bounded.

Reasons for “strongest”:

I have more examples and details I can relate.

From a science point of view, I like to see how society benefits from technology.

I chose it because I realize that not one culture developed all the science. It is a combination of cultures
that develop the science.

Because I think we should pay more attention to what we are doing to achieve progress. I like this topic
because it gives me the opportunity to talk about what I think are the problems that are affecting us as
human beings. We can't talk about this every day.

Because I feel that technology is over emphasized with humanity always taking the back seat.

Reasons for “weakest”:

I think, it is a good topic but difficult to write about because for me science is a difficult topic.
This would be difficult for me because I am not sure what the statement is looking for.

I have problems with some of those who set the standards in science. Who is to accurately measure if this
data is indeed unbiased?

7 requires some form of knowledge about hard and soft data in relation to the scientific arena.

Some individuals are not knowledgeable of the concepts that are related to hard and soft data, and would
therefore have trouble writing an essay about this.
I am not familiar with much of the information pertaining to this subject.

It may cause difficulty because even though I know a little about science my knowledge in research procedures is very limited.

The subject seems difficult to me. I could not right off start writing about this subject.

The concepts embedded in the sciences are too factual for judgment to be used.

Because science is a topic in which I have difficulties writing on.

First, I don't like sciences and it would be difficult because it is a technical matter with a lot of procedures and theories. It would be difficult for me to apply it to daily living and interrelationship.

This topic would be difficult for me because I don't have great scientific knowledge of which I believe is necessary to answer this question accurately.

When dealing with the sciences, I would like to have a stronger foundation before I write an essay.

I have a strong liberal arts background. Science bores me and I don't understand it fully. I write more passionately for subjects I enjoy and understand.

In writing an essay for this topic, I would probably spend a great deal of time trying to analyze different cultures before attempting to create an introductory statement.

I do not find the topic interesting and would have a difficult time deciding on how my thoughts should be organized as well as drawing from observation and experience.

It would be very difficult because I do not know much about science.

Perhaps my prejudices towards "bias free" science would cause my writing and reasoning to go off the deep end.

8. It is a common practice in debating societies for speakers simply to be told which position they are to take. Their own beliefs are not considered relevant. I have never done this in any situation and I never will. I may not always be right, but I care passionately about what is true and I never say anything that I do not believe to be right.

Reasons for "strongest":

I feel it to be extremely important to tell the truth. Lies are built on nothing but deceit and so is our society.

Reasons for "weakest":

I feel this topic would be difficult for me to write about because we live in a society where the truth tends to be hidden from the population anyway.

This question seems to give a reader/writer a certain opinion to write about, kind of like defending your arguments.

8 is a controversial statement because in many cases, it is difficult for a person to view a situation rationally depending upon the circumstances.
It would cause difficulty because the question is too long and is hard to understand what the point is.

Too many words -- difficult to understand.

The beliefs of what actually the person will be saying to the people. For instance if I am going to run for a senate, I would not know what my issues would be on.

9. It is through the use of logic and of precise, careful measurement that we become aware of our progress. Without such tools, we have no reference points to indicate how far we have advanced or retreated.

Reasons for “weakest”:

It is difficult to quickly come up with support measures used and logic also, that the statements refers to.

Topic 9 would probably be most difficult for me to write a good "pro" essay on because I disagree. I feel "logic" and "measurements" have the capacity to become biased.

Topic and precision are not my best assets, and I could be so.

I have never seen, heard of or read about anything dealing with international influences.

I have no interest or experience in answering this topic.

10. Scandals -- whether in politics, academia, or other areas -- can be useful. They focus our attention on problems in ways that no speaker or reformer ever could.

Reasons for “strongest”:

The reason for selecting this topic is simple -- it is based on current social issues. Lately, the main focus of society has been to expose scandals such as the OJ Simpson case, the Iran Contra affair and the Watergate scandal of the early 1970s.

Because I have a lot of ideas that relate to education and all the things involved in the system.

Reasons for “weakest”:

It would be difficult for me, because I do not believe that any good comes from this.

I think scandals show mainly how corrupt people are, and systems, rules so on are not well followed.

It is hard for me to correctly define scandals in this day and age.

11. The character of a society can be measured by the character of the men and women that society chooses as its heroes.

Reasons for “strongest”:

Because I believe who and how we choose our heroes reflects society's beliefs and value. I have strong opinions about this issue.
Because I am very aware that our young men and women are placing their trust in professional sports figures. I believe this is very dangerous because these sports figures are only human.

Easily influenced people (children) usually choose role models for the wrong reason.

Because I tend to have very strong feelings about this topic and expressing them would be easy and pleasurable to me.

I believe that characters (heroes) are role models for society's youth. I believe they help make a difference.

I think that society is influenced by what kind of values the people living in it have and the role model or heroes we choose are part of it.

Reasons for “weakest”:

Would cause me some difficulty because it deals with a subject that I feel very strongly about, but because of my background I have mixed feelings about.

12. With the growth of global networks in such areas as economics and communication, there is no doubt that every aspect of society -- including education, politics, the arts, and the sciences -- will benefit greatly from international influences.

Reasons for “strongest”:

The new fad amongst education has been "multicultural" education. Though I disagree with the superficial way it is being promoted, Topic 12 states what multicultural education has the capacity to do.

I have taken classes that deal with global network.

Reasons for “weakest”:

For myself, this as well as several topics would cause difficulty in generating argument.

I do think there is doubt that every aspect of society will benefit GREATLY. A student should not be forced to write about something he's not in agreement with (unless you would consider appropriate an essay on why society wouldn't benefit from the international influences.)

This may cause me some difficulty because of my prior knowledge on the subject.

13. What is called human nature is really a reflection of the human condition: if all people had a reasonable share of territory and resources, such evil products of “human nature” as war and crime would become extremely rare.

Reasons for “strongest”:

There are personal reasons why I think I would perform best on this topic, i.e., I have read about, written about and discussed it several times before. However, it provides what some questions did not, a framework within which to write. It encourages the student/test-taker to develop a point of view based on the topic rather than leaving him with a nebulous understanding of the question.
I chose this topic because as a junior historian or historical scholar I have studied patterns of "human nature" vs. human condition and circumstances resulting from environment.

Because it relates to how the world is fight with each other for hunger??

Reasons for "weakest":

I'm not sure I understand what the topic entails. Not understanding the topic would shy me away from writing the essay.

14. No other social organization can adequately fulfill the function of the family unit in society.

Reasons for "strongest":

I selected this topic because this is a topic that I have a substantial knowledge base to utilize. I feel very strongly about this subject and feel that I could write well about it.

Because I believe that the family is a very important piece of the puzzle of survival.

I think that family unit is the most important organization. I totally agree and could elaborate.

I selected topic 14 because it encompasses every aspect of an individual's relationships with himself and others, whether it be in the world of work or social relationship.

I strongly believe in family and know of the importance of a stable family. Family is a topic that everyone can relate to whether their particular situation is good or bad.

I selected this topic because a family is and always will be one of the most important positions an individual may have.

I am very family oriented and work closely with family groups. My strong belief of family value and personal experiences will provide a good essay.

I strongly believe in this statement.

I think it is a very broad topic to which most of our social, economic and environmental problems (among others) can be related. It is very actual and important.

It is a good topic for an essay, it can be used to show that good and bad things in our society has its origin in the family.

Because a family unit is the most important organization we belong to.

I picked this topic because when the family unit is destroyed or interrupted so is parts of society.

15. Only through mistakes can there be discovery or progress.

Reasons for "strongest":

I selected this topic because I truly believe that this topic has truth behind it and I feel I can express my views on it.
15 is a true statement because we learn and benefit mentally through the experience of mistakes.

Because I think that when someone tells me that I'm committing a mistake or error in life or a job, situation, I would realize what I'm doing it. I will see it like if I committed a mistake, I have to fix it and it will improve my performance either in a job or my life.

I can relate to something that I know or I had had experience with.

16. Nothing is quite as it appears.

Reasons for “strongest”:
This has been a dominate theme in my life since my public protest against nuclear waste at my reservation: this topic is open enough for me to draw on personal experience.

Reasons for “weakest”:
It is too broad and one would probably waste a lot of time narrowing it down.
Not much direction is given.
The topic is not concrete or direct. Very broad.
This is the most general and ambiguous of the potential topics. The question, itself, provides little direction and thus lends itself to responses which do the same.
It is too broad. There may be many related subjects to this topic, that I would have to decide which ones might appeal to the grader.
This statement seems a bit abstract.
Even though it is a good theme, it is general, making it difficult to define what could be expressed in 45 minutes.

17. Humanity has made little real progress over the past century or so. Technological innovations have taken place, but the overall condition of humanity is no better. Wars and violence still abound. Poverty is still with us. Our environment changes, but our nature remains the same. Technology cannot change the condition of humanity.

Reasons for “strongest”:
The current issues (national) are dealing with those very subjects
I strongly believe technology can change the condition of humanity if society wants to be changed.
This topic seemed to be more alive and active than the others. I don't believe every word of the topic but it excites me.
I choose this topic because it is a real issue that faces us today and it needs to be addressed, debated, and resolved.
Being a computer science student, I have seen first hand what technology can and cannot do.

I have always noticed that, no matter how practical an investigation might be, or how it may make life easier, only certain people will benefit from that invention.

The reason is because it's happening now. I see a lot of changes, when I compare it to my parents childhood days.

The incorporation of social problems is extremely important. It is a broad topic which needs to be talked and discussed more about. This is a good way to do it.

Because it is very true of the way the world is today. We are continuously making strides in technology but the way people are being treated has made little or no progress at all.

Because of the world we live in today technology is taking over.

Technology, environment and humanity are closely related and this issue is futurist.

I would select this topic because I strongly disagree with the idea and I believe that I can prove by essay that people and technology have progressed together for the better.

It is a good topic for an essay because it encompasses large areas in the world around us (science, human nature, poverty, medicine). It encompasses our past as well as our future.

The instrument used to measure progress is obviously poor. Humanity always works to enhance something.

Other topics seemed too ambiguous or either too restricted within themselves. This is an interesting issue. I think it's time we re-evaluate what progress is really about.

Reasons for “weakest”:

My traditional background validates that technology has taken the place of who we are. Hence, we have forgotten about our spiritual self. It appeals to our world now.

Reasons for “strongest”:

As a student I can relate to the importance of education specifically higher education and I have a definite opinion of its role in my life.

I selected this topic because many teachers today do not emphasize the importance of how the class effects our real-world encounters.

I chose this topic because I am a college student and my education will hopefully do more for me than get me a job.

I choose this topic because as a future educator I plan to teach children the value system, a standard, and a set of ideas.
The reason I selected topic 18 is because I can relate more closely to the education field.

It is an area that I know a little about and believe in.

Because I feel that an education proves that a person has the ability to be trained.

This topic is brought up by students and educators all the time. It is a topic that I am most intimate with.

I selected this topic because I think that having an education is not only to prepare for a job, but also to have better standards.

I selected this topic because of personal experience. It does appear education's goal is money and not respect toward each other.

This topic is a very important issue to me. I would enjoy expressing my beliefs and ideas on the issue.

As an educated individual, I believe that the purpose of education should be self-fulfillment.

I select this topic because I made a research on a related theme, and have the experience to agree with it.

Because it is a good subject to debate and controversial because the purpose of education is to prepare for a job.

Reasons for “weakest”:

I feel this topic would be most difficult for me to write a good essay because I disagree with the statement at hand.

Although school may teach values, the main purpose of school is to acquire knowledge as tools for the job.
FORM B

1. The way you interpret the materials you work with in your academic field is more a matter of temperament than of training. Different interpretations come about when people with different temperaments look at exactly the same objects, facts, data, or events and see different things.

Reasons for “strongest”:

First, my perspective on that issue is congruent with that statement. Secondly, I think that the statement describes an important feature of public communication studies, my academic field.

Reasons for “weakest”:

It is a lazy question that requires little thought and little effort, a lot of these questions tend to insult one’s intelligence.

I find it difficult to interpret now the temperament of people and identify how it effects their views.

Would cause some difficulty due to the fact that, to me, "academic field" is a vague term.

The language in the essay is not clear. The word different is used too many times in the description.

I would not say that it would cause difficulty but it lacks my interest.

The topic is more vague and less creative than the other topics. It just doesn’t invite the potential writer to explore many different arguments and ideas.

It isn’t something that I would care to read about or write about.

2. Legislation cannot solve many problems of modern society: moral behavior cannot be legislated.

Reasons for “strongest”:

One of the main reasons why I selected #2 is that we (Americans) are faced with so many social ills i.e., poverty, hunger, lack of education, violence, just to name a few. Morality cannot be legislated because of us humans being so diverse and our physical, biological make up so different.

I believe that there is a great deal of information in our society that proves this statement true. I could cite from these many laws and situations to support this thesis.

Moral behavior is a very important issue to me and my family, we are Christians.

It deals with an issue which is very prevalent in society today and that is the decline of moral behavior.

Reasons for “weakest”:

I am not very familiar with our legislation, basically I am not into governmental issues.

I could not write an essay on topic 2 because the question is not stated clearly to me. The question leaves me somewhat to be confused.

The reason is because I might need to have a politics background to write an essay on this topic.
I do not know enough bills (by name) to use them as back-up points for an argument.

3. It is through our identification with social groups that we define ourselves.

Reasons for "strongest":

Socialization is considered to be one of the basic needs. Therefore it would be easier to write about an individual need as taken from experience and observation.

It is a topic that I feel strongly about.

Although the topic is general, it is one that I have a lot of opinions about. I feel that I could take various perspectives on my argument.

This is an issue that individuals are faced with everyday in regards to race, sex, religion and also in the fraternity/sorority debate.

I am currently affiliated with a social group. It is through this affiliation I am able to meet women from every aspect of the world.

I have discussed this topic previously.

It enables me to relate the best. Also many ideas spring up as I read the topic.

I strongly believe that this statement is true and I can support this with relatively easy thought.

I have done a course in different social groups in the society.

Reasons for "weakest":

I felt this topic was the most difficult to write on because examples would be hard to find.

It doesn't have an interest for me.

It seems as if it would be hard to prove. I would have trouble citing examples to support statements in favor of these arguments because I disagree with the statement. I have not encountered such an example.

It is too broad and not appealing to write an essay about.

I have always been taught to be the best that I can be and get an education to go farther and not look at others.

4. In our time, specialists of all kinds are highly overrated. We need more generalists -- people who can provide broad perspectives.

Reasons for "strongest":

I believe in the cliché that a specialist is one who knows more and more about less and less.

Due to the need in our society to get back to the fundamental concepts that shape all; specialists limit their perspectives in writing which may impede their message from getting across to lay persons.
Reasons for “weakest”:

I cannot see any way of writing an essay against specialization.

Too opinionated.

Because I don't know anything about generalists.

5. What human beings really want is not knowledge, but certainty.

Reasons for “weakest”:

Disagreement with topic statement. Without knowledge of specifics there can be no guarantee to certainty.

Writing and analyzing choice, is not something I would care to write. Writing about topic 16, I feel, is more important.

Because it is much too vague. I would have difficulty organizing it.

Because it is very hard to know what human beings really want. As a human being I know what I need, but it is hard to know what people want.

This is a very ambiguous statement and I think it would be rather difficult to write about this without getting everybody’s opinion on the subject.

I would not know which angle to attack this essay effectively.

I am not sure what this question is even asking.

6. In any field of endeavor -- the sciences, the humanities, the social sciences, industry, etc. -- it is not the attainment of a goal that matters, but rather the ideas and discoveries that are encountered on the way to the goal.

Reasons for “strongest”:

I truly believe that the journey is the most important part, not the goals. Self discovery and learning is very important.

Reasons for “weakest”:

This topic is one that is too broad for me and I would not make any sense probably.

7. Children are the parents of women and men; how children are socialized today determines the destiny of our society. Unfortunately, we have not yet learned how to raise children who can help bring about a better society.

Reasons for “strongest”:

I feel an affinity for the sense of community.
I could write the best essay on topic 7 because I have the full understanding of the question. I also feel knowledgeable about this topic.

We have learned much concerning our environment and made monumental technological discoveries but humanity and the struggles within mankind have not been solved. I believe I could write a good essay on this subject because I feel we have not spent enough effort in this area.

Because I am familiar with it, and I enjoy this topic.

The topic is general, and at my age, I am aware of children in our society through TV, newspaper, etc.

Because this topic is about an area in which I am very concerned with and active in.

This topic deals with a broad perspective, but with specific attributes. It speaks of the most important people...children. There are many points to focus on and different ideas.

This society is in big trouble due to the negligence toward our children who are our future.

I think it is important to our society to know how to raise children in a modern world.

I think that the key for obtaining a better society with mentally well human beings is by preventing and the best prevention starts with the children.

I selected this topic because the statement presents a major problem that we have in our society; how to prepare our children to become better citizens in the future.

I have participated on many debates on this very topic and feel that my experience with the topic would only serve to enhance my essay.

Because the statement in itself is factual; children are the parents of society requiring them to be taught well.

This topic was selected because it is a topic that this country is faced with and one that I have strong interest in.

It is a topic that I feel strongly about. Because I care so much about the future of our society, which is the children, this would not be a hard topic.

Because I can relate to it the most.

The children of today are tomorrow's leaders and they need guidance not to succeed in the future.

We all belong to a certain social group but we need to learn to be ourselves to make a difference in this world.

Because people from different cultures see things in a different way on account of their different background.

I have had prior experience in this field as a social worker and have children of whom to relate this issue to.

Because it's something I think about and strongly believe that in some cases, technology handicaps many qualities of humanity.
Children are not being raised like years before. It seems like we are loosing them.

Because of my type of work, and being a single mother of three, I see the resemblance.

Reasons for “weakest”:

It is very personal issue. People have different circumstances in their lives and what the parents teach does not mean the children will follow.

I do not know much about these topics, and they do not give much support.

It really requires a philosophical answer, I believe, and I am not the best at providing such answers.

Due to fact that question tries to generalize parenting and doesn't recognize the variables involved.

8. An expert in any field hopes to produce work that will have a lasting influence. But the same expert must also focus on the contemporary impact of the work and respond to critics who argue from an opposing point of view. Even if the argument that rages today seems likely to become terribly dated in decades to come, it is the expert's job to address the critics' concerns, no matter how short-lived those concerns promise to be.

Reasons for “strongest”:

Because one day I hope to become a well known scientist and to get there I will have to deal with critics.

Reasons for “weakest”:

8 is wordy and ambiguous and is too broad to be covered adequately in 45 min.

It is too complicated.

Because I don't care for the topic and I don't understand the point of the question.

The topic covers too much ground.

It is a very complex topic and it seems to be time consuming.

I don't have much respect for critics. I feel that constructive criticism is good, but the problem lies in the degree of constructiveness.

9. It is through the use of logic and of precise, careful measurement that we become aware of our progress. Without such tools, we have no reference points to indicate how far we have advanced or retreated.

Reasons for “strongest”:

I am a history major. Anyone can relate past to present.
Reasons for "weakest":

I do not believe progress can be measured in this way because progress in many areas results in the breaking down and destruction of others -- so we must look at progress as it affects the entire scope of humanity.

The statement is not very clear to me.

The topic should be addressed using a philosophical approach, so it is difficult to think and organize the thoughts for this essay in a limited period of time.

I have no real idea what the question is about.

The topic does not really interest me. It's not thought provoking.

It would be hard for me to develop a concrete basis for my argument in a 45 minute time period.

The topic doesn't interest me because I never think about measuring my progress. As long as I am growing and doing what I want to do, I'm happy.

Reasons for "strongest":

As an educator, and as a future parent, teaching children on a personal level in order to motivate them to build on their strengths is my mission.

I feel that education is one of my strongest interests.

Because I'm a teacher and I know how important is the education of a person.

Because is a general problem that concern to every student no matter what they are studying for. For me life is more than be a productive worker.

It is the one that I've thought about the most.

Because I have lived the life of a student and can provide first hand information on the topic.

I'm an elementary education major and I am a firm believer of what number 10 says.

As an aspiring educator, I believe that education should encompass both of these aspects.

I have strong feelings about this topic and have already engaged in some discussions about it. I could support the statement well with examples and reasons.

I know about this topic from first hand experience.
11. As we acquire more knowledge, things do not become more comprehensible, but more complex and more mysterious.

Reasons for "weakest":

It is a topic that requires an element that I have yet to experience. So it would be a challenge for me to write on the topic.

This topic would be difficult because the statement appears contradictory with the definition of knowledge.

12. With the growth of global networks in such areas as economics and communication, there is no doubt that every aspect of society -- including education, politics, the arts, and the sciences -- will benefit greatly from international influences.

Reasons for "strongest":

Studying business for the past few years I have noticed the growing demand for global awareness -- it's our future.

Reasons for "weakest":

I do not take a strong interest, nor am I abreast of world trade and economics.

Because maybe the influence will add to the problems we are already facing.

13. Art upsets; science reassures.

Reasons for "strongest":

13 is clear and to the point. It can be easily organized and defended or rejected in a small amount of time.

At present time I am inclined to pursue a higher education in both art and science. I have a dilemma: weighing one's sacrifices versus the other's rewards and vice-versa.

This is shortly stated, not biased like others, which would make it easy to refute. Besides as an architecture student, I have a strong opinion about it.

I selected this because I have strong personal viewpoints on this topic.

I am a firm believer in the arts. Art has the ability to provoke thought and discussion and is more open to interpretation than rigid science.

Reasons for "weakest":

Depending on which stand you take; for example, a person may love art and another may say that science reassures. These points of view are too personal and too subjective.

It's too vague -- and I don't completely agree with the statement.
Everyone can't figure out what little sayings mean. Creativity doesn't come through for everyone. So in order to write about it would be difficult if you're not on the right train of thought.

I have absolutely no information that proves or disproves this statement. I simply would not know where to begin.

It is not clear that art upsets and science reassures. The topic would be hard to explain.

This topic would be difficult for me because I am not familiar enough with art nor is the statement clear enough for me to write a successful paper.

I am not positively sure why science reassures and art upsets and do not feel I could develop an adequate essay.

Because I am not familiar with the topic.

Because I don't see much to write on or what to write about.

This topic doesn't have enough information to it. It is also not a topic I could connect with.

Too philosophical -- there's no right or wrong answer. It all depends on how one sees it. It would be difficult for me to devise a question either way. As a matter of fact, I believe it's the other way around.

Because I don't understand nothing about art and I don't have ideas about this topic.

This topic will cause difficulty because it is too specific, and people with little knowledge about arts and science will write a poor essay.

I really have trouble gathering up ideas on how art upsets. Basically the question is very unclear to me.

I think it will cause difficulty because it is not a clear topic statement and the word "upsets" can have too many interpretations.

Probably because it is not very interesting, and that in order for someone to write on this topic they must be an expert.

Lack of interest in the arts and natural sciences. Boredom will overwhelm my training of thought.

I would find it difficult to write on this essay because I feel that, unfortunately, only people who are really in tune with both subjects can give an educated answer, although sometimes a blind opinion will occasionally be heard.

I am not familiar with the upsets of art nor reassurances of the sciences and therefore would not be able to comment on an issue of uncertainty.

The topic does not trigger any interest at all. It is too dull and needs more input.

Because there is so much a person has to infer and what happens if they cannot relate to either of the two subjects?

I can relate to the topic, but pulling examples would be difficult to relate to the topic.

This topic would cause difficulty because I do not have a solid background about art and scientific views conflict with my views on religion. Ex. Big Bang theory vs. Adam & Eve.
I don't have much knowledge of art.

Too broad. I don't see the connection.

I don't believe it to be true. I think it varies from person to person and event to event.

14. Our declining environment may bring the people of the world together as no politician, philosopher, or war ever could. Environmental problems are global in scope and respect no nation's boundaries. Therefore, people are faced with the choice of unity and cooperation on the one hand or disunity and a common tragedy on the other.

Reasons for "strongest":

The disunity of people is the cause of many of the world's problems, today. A declining environment may help people realize this topics is good for expressing personal opinion.

I selected this topic because I feel I have a good background to answer this sort of essay.

I agree with the statement and I would be able to provide many examples.

Because I feel strongly that cooperation between diverse groups is essential to the survival of mankind.

Reasons for "weakest":

Because everyone is out there trying to take advantage of others, not knowing who is hurting.

I am not very familiar with environmental topics, therefore, I can not form a strong opinion on how they would effect people socially.

I do not have strong feelings about this topic. I don't even know exactly what it is looking for.

15. Only through mistakes can there be discovery or progress.

Reasons for "strongest":

During my lifetime I have made many mistakes and when I discovered them it made me a better person.

I selected this topic because I personally have learned from my mistakes.

I selected this topic because I can relate to it. I have made mistakes and progressed by learning from them.

From my science background, it would be relatively easy for me to show how many of your great discoveries occurred by mistake.

I selected this topic due to its reality and its common sense content. It is a topic I relate to, as well as practice.

Has a broad and far-ranging scope that is beneficial for developing a coherent paper. It would also be easy to cite examples.
16. The best preparation for life is not learning to be competitive, but learning to be cooperative.

Reasons for “strongest”:

Because this question, in another form, is one that I contemplate often.

I feel that this is true because it is what you learn by being cooperative.

Because every day we are judged as to how well we do competitively. We are then rewarded if we come out on top. Often, competition can keep us at odds with one another. Always one trying to out do the other. It is something I'm very familiar with as a student. On a positive note, I think cooperation produces better outcome.

Because we need to learn both. We have to learn how to be competitive and cooperative at the same time for both teacher and student.

I would be able to apply a great deal of personal experiences.

17. Humanity has made little real progress over the past century or so. Technological innovations have taken place, but the overall condition of humanity is no better. Wars and violence still abound. Poverty is still with us. Our environment changes, but our nature remains the same. Technology cannot change the condition of humanity.

Reasons for “strongest”:

Because this topic contains in it also topics #1 and #9. I think I could write an essay covering these three aspects in one.

I selected this topic because I am familiar with a lifestyle of war and violence; I can also relate to poverty and the nature of mankind.

Because it was clear and thought provoking to me. Different ideas came to mind after I read it.

Though I do not agree with the basic premise of the topic, I find it very interesting and full of possibilities and ideas to explore.

I'd like to prove this statement to be wrong. I also feel I have lots of ideals for which I can write from.

Reasons for “weakest”:

I don't know enough about humanities.

18. People think that if a thing can be done, then it ought to be done, and that if something has been invented, then we must use it. We seldom stop to think of the possible consequences.

Reasons for “strongest”:

Because this topic really portrays how our society behaves today.

I am very familiar with the technological world.
FORM C

1. You should test every theory by asking the question: 'If this theory is accepted, what tangible difference will it make to anyone?' Then you are in the best possible position for understanding what the theory means and for discussing its value.

Reasons for "strongest":

Mostly because of my background in philosophy.

Reasons for "weakest":

I am not interested in this topic at all. I would not be able to back up my reasons well.

Appears very technical which leads to very technical answer that requires the proper background.

The topic itself was posed in a confusing manner.

I believe it is too general, it does not discuss a specific problem therefore making it hard for me to write about. I also don't have enough examples relevant to the subject.

It's not the topic I found difficult, it's the way it is written that is not clear.

I believe I would rather go out and experience life/trial and error, etc. than contemplate theories.

Because this is a subject that does not appeal to me.

The mere mention of the word theory brings to mind the ideas of science and research. These two entities are things, in my opinion, that should be carefully pondered, and it is not something that I would care to write about in a timed exam.

It is very difficult for me to write about abstract subjects.

Topic 1 appears to be too broad for a person to be able to focus on a specific area.

2. The material progress, security, and peace of one country are necessarily connected to the material progress, security, and peace of all other countries.

Reasons for "weakest":

If you are not very knowledgeable in history, then it may be hard to formulate good or concrete reasons and examples.

I simply do not find the topic interesting it may be difficult to write a good essay impromptu on this topic.

3. It is through our identification with social groups that we define ourselves.

Reasons for "strongest":

I selected this topic because this is an area I have studied in my major and minor and therefore have some knowledge on it. I also feel this is something most people can relate to.

I can relate to this topic better than some others. This topic also relates better with my major.
For me, it would be easy to organize and write an essay on this topic. It is general enough to elicit personal opinion, but not so general that it would be too daunting.

I have taken two sociology classes that extensively discussed self-definition through social groups.

I chose this topic because it focuses on a universal subject that every student can relate to -- group identification.

Because I agree with it 100%.

I would be able to identify myself and be able to state who I really am.

In order for us to productively live in this present-day society we have to belong or associate ourselves to one.

Reasons for "weakest":

There is no reference point, within each social group the terms of identity change and this requires that I have a detailed working knowledge of each social group to write a proper essay.

The explanation of a theory would be most difficult because I have not had enough experience with it to give examples to give an accurate essay.

Because this topic does not interest me.

4. Technology is a necessary but not always a positive force in modern life.

Reasons for "strongest":

I think that I can provide enough information to support it.

In my field of studies, I am very familiar with technological advances and know the consequences it may bring.

The particular topic deals with my field of study which makes me more able to identify with the issue.

Reasons for "weakest":

There is too much logical reasoning in it.

Because I disagree with the topic, technology is very important, we have to learn more about it every day.

Because I had absolutely no idea what the topic is about or what I should respond to.

I'm not sure I'd be able to give detailed and important information on technology.

I have never been a theorist or someone who is deeply interested in relevance or importance.
5. It is impossible for any society -- or any large organized group of people -- to maximize both the freedom and the equality of people. Any steps taken to insure liberty will surely create inequality, and any steps taken to promote equality will occur only at the expense of liberty.

Reasons for “weakest”:

In my opinion, it would be difficult to support this topic at a moments notice.

I think this would be difficult because I would lack knowledge with political and social sciences in terms of basic understanding of the field.

6. In any field of endeavor -- the sciences, the humanities, the social sciences, industry, etc. -- it is not the attainment of a goal that matters, but rather the ideas and discoveries that are encountered on the way to the goal.

Reasons for “strongest”:

My studies in Sociology have given me a good background in this area. This statement is also something I feel is true.

It challenges ideals of the working class to the scientists.

Reasons for “weakest”:

The topic is a bit too broad. Money, much of the time, is the “goal” of people's endeavors.

I have no clue on the subject.

Is very abstract. It would take me a long time to think of something to write.

I don’t think I know as much as I should when it comes down to industry and social sciences.

7. True success can be judged in only one way, by one person. There are no external indicators by which true success can be demonstrated. Success is achieved by meeting those standards that one sets for oneself.

Reasons for “strongest”:

Topic 7 is the best topic because there are many examples in life a person can observe.

I am a very idealistic person and I feel that if each man sees himself as successful then as a whole we all are.

I selected this topic because I can relate to it coming from a society that I feel does have a diminished sense of being.

No one knows the limitation or strengths of an individual better than that person, therefore who is a better judge.

I firmly believe in the affirmation of this topic and it would not be difficult to express my ideas on this topic.

This topic was very general and it did not require a certain field of expertise.

I have strong feelings on this particular subject.

Because I am very knowledgeable of my culture.
I feel I'd enjoy writing about this topic because it deals with feelings, how one views things, events, life, the world.

I can relate more to this topic than any others because of personal experiences and beliefs.

I chose topic 7 because true success can be only judged by one person.

It has personal meaning for me. I totally agree with that statement, for it centers around my lifelong philosophy.

Pertains to an ideal that I personally find intriguing. Who is a better judge of a person than her or himself.

This topic can explore myself as an individual.

Because individual success is measured by standards set by an individual — to overcome obstacles set by general society such as minorities are not suppose to be achievers.

8. The way people look, dress, and act reveals their attitudes and interests. You can tell much about a society's ideas and feelings by observing the outward characteristics of its people.

Reasons for "strongest":

I can totally agree with the statement said, however, a person's outward look tells a lot about their character.

I feel that most people's attitudes are revealed through their dress.

I chose this topic because it is a situation a student would face at school or in the workplace. This is an everyday observation seen by almost anyone.

It is a broad topic. This essay can be written in many different perspectives.

It is a topic that can be used to compare the different attitudes people tend to follow and the patterns on the appearance of people.

Because every time some people judge the others by their looks which not represent how really is a person.

I feel I could support this best with personal experience and examples.

Social psychology says that stereotyping people may cause them to have a negative self image about themselves.

Because we really can tell much about a person by the way they look.

The topic was neutral and most people could form a logical opinion about this topic.

It is the way I have raised to look my best, dress my best, and act at the top of my capability.

Reasons for "weakest":

It is very hard to use examples from several societies to judge the society without being ethnocentric unless the person is an expert.

Because of a lack of background knowledge on this topic.

Because the way a person looks and dresses determines how society will or will not accept them.
It is a superficial question — to judge someone solely on the basis of looks and not heart or soul.

9. It is through the use of logic and of precise, careful measurement that we become aware of our progress. Without such tools, we have no reference points to indicate how far we have advanced or retreated.

Reasons for “weakest”:

9 would cause difficulty since my knowledge in that area is limited.

It is too abstract. The basis of reason is logic but the possibilities are boundless. It would be difficult to grade.

Would be difficult because I’m not exactly sure what they mean about the use of logic and of precise, careful measurement in the context.

10. Progress is best made through discussion among people who have contrasting points of view.

Reasons for “strongest”:

I believe in holding fast to your ideas, but at the same time, you should be open to new ones. I feel that I could provide positive ideas to this topic.

This question appeals to me because I can answer simply based on general life experiences.

Reasons for “weakest”:

Most people do not associate with those who think differently than themselves.

11. We owe almost all our knowledge not to people who have agreed, but to people who have disagreed.

Reasons for “strongest”:

I have a working base knowledge from which I can draw examples and it is a topic of interest.

This is something we can appreciate in our daily lives. In fields such as politics, sciences, communications and education only people that went against the established made the difference.

Because I strongly believe this statement is true and I have examples to support this belief.

Reasons for “weakest”:

Because this is a very general statement which one could write much about and still come to no conclusion.

12. With the growth of global networks in such areas as economics and communication, there is no doubt that every aspect of society — including education, politics, the arts, and the sciences — will benefit greatly from international influences.

Reasons for “strongest”:

I had spontaneously most arguments go through my mind on what to write on this topic.

It is pertinent to life in general and most students/people can identify with it.
Reasons for "weakest":

It would be difficult to write a good essay because I have limited knowledge of other cultures and customs. I am only familiar and aware of only two people influences -- European and African.

I think that this topic would cause difficulty because I am not up to date or well informed about this issue in relation to other countries.

Does need to have a little understanding of how it comes about. If one doesn't have any idea of this, it will be very difficult to write about it. Galileo, Darwin, Marx and Malcolm X introduced “outrageous” ideas to the people of their times. But in the long run the only thing they did was just to open a new path of knowledge and understanding for the human kind to travel through. The ideas and beliefs of these men changed our points of view for the better. They are just a few examples of what humanity can obtain through a little discussion and disagreement.

Because I'm not very aware of international news and I certainly don't like politics and international affairs.

Although I'm not totally uninformed with the subject matter, I still don't know enough to create an acceptable essay.

A person needs to be aware of what these subjects are. It is also hard to understand.

13. Rituals and ceremonies help define a culture. Without them, societies or groups of people have a diminished sense of who they are.

Reasons for "strongest":

This topic was picked because of the diversity of cultures incorporating ideas into the western social system.

This topic was chosen because of its potential to be challenging, interesting, and appealing to my sense of culture awareness.

This topic deals with an area which is familiar to everyone.

Because I have a better understanding and consensus in this area.

I selected this topic because the rituals and ceremonies within my life are not the basis of who I am.

Because in our days, our young people are very confused and sometimes they don't know who they are or where they came from.

Because I come from a traditional background culture and without it, I would be lost.

There is a lot to be said about the diversities and similarities of various cultures. This topic is informative and interesting.

I selected this topic because I relate cultural rituals and ceremonies to who I am.

I selected this topic because humans are ritualistic by nature and I would have no problem citing examples and cases.

I have a more personal understanding of the topic.
Reasons for "weakest":

Most people don't go through only type of rituals.

Because I don't think I would agree with this statement.

14. Societies all over the world are becoming more and more dependent on knowledge. In the twenty-first century, people will need to continue learning after they leave school.

Reasons for "strongest":

The topic is clear. I think also because of a personal love for education, it is a topic that can really be supported with concrete reasons and examples.

I chose this topic due to its relationship to learning and its possible implications concerning continued schooling beyond high school.

I selected this topic because in this topic the issue of knowledge and its pursuit are obviously essential and expressing this issue, I think, should not be neglected. Higher education is not only the future, but now.

Because it is closely related to my study area. The success in professional careers depend upon the knowledge we have obtained.

I selected this topic because it is something that I feel strongly about and I have some understanding of what it really means.

I select this particular topic because education is very important and a continuous process.

It is evident and prevalent that those with degrees of higher learning are surviving the best.

15. Only through mistakes can there be discovery or progress.

Reasons for "strongest":

Theories, inventions, and other technological contributions have all resulted via the building or further exploration of one's mistakes or initial findings.

I would have more and interesting things to say that would relate to this topic.

Because that is the only way to make valuable contributions to the society.

If any of our former leaders were alive today they would definitely agree that this statement reflect the keys to their success. As a result, I have decided to select this topic.

I chose this topic because in order to make a discovery and progress, through mistakes you will find solutions.

I selected this topic because it is very personal to me. I'm successful today because I've learned from mistakes.

I think I could do well on the topic because I have lots of experience.

Reasons for "weakest":

This topic presents an argument, but there is really not much one can say after stating the obvious.
16. The extinction of the dinosaurs millions of years before the existence of human beings shows that the extinction of an animal species is a normal phenomenon in the natural world. Thus, society should not make extraordinary efforts, especially at a great cost in money and jobs, to save endangered species.

Reasons for "strongest":

For one thing, because I have a personal interest in the topic and for another the goal of the essay is defined clearly.

Because I work in a research about endangered species, and I'm studying for it and I really believe it.

Reasons for "weakest":

Because I am not aware of the phenomenon. I don't know too much about it.

Not exactly difficult but lack of interest for the topic. Only a few things to say about dinosaurs and environment.

Because we don't have an extensive knowledge about the prehistoric life, specially in animals. We know more from the development of the Humanities and Sciences through out all the times.

Because I don't know too much about the topic in order to develop a good essay.

Extinction of a species does not necessarily mean that you do not try to save them. I find it hard to agree with the topic sentence.

Although almost all of the topics are argumentative, this one seems to be more so; moreover, people may have their thinking clouded by strong feelings and prejudices they may have concerning the idea presented.

This topic is too one-sided and biased; it seems to represent the attitude of an egoist!

The statement does not reflect my personal views, thus making it difficult for me to argue this point.

I cannot relate to the topic and because I believe the total opposite of what the topic is stating.

That is giving my opinion or interpretation of a topic I am not interested in. In other words, not familiar.

I think this will be a difficult topic to write about because I have little knowledge about history and theory on prehistoric times.

This topic would be difficult to me because it does not interest me.

I feel that it will be difficult because the extinction of dinosaurs is not relevant in society today.

I haven't studied this area enough, and plus it involves questionable theories.

The extinction of the dinosaurs, money, jobs and endangered species are not of great importance in my culture.

I would find it difficult, because it seems like an illogical argument to defend without factual data.
17. Humanity has made little real progress over the past century or so. Technological innovations have taken place, but the overall condition of humanity is no better. Wars and violence still abound. Poverty is still with us. Our environment changes, but our nature remains the same. Technology cannot change the condition of humanity.

Reasons for “strongest”:
I believe that technological innovations are America's “new” problems.

Reasons for “weakest”:
The scope of the reply is too wide. There are many factors to consider.
Too many contrasting viewpoints to it.
It is a topic that groups several ideas to which too many references can be crossed.

18. The goal of politics should not be the pursuit of an ideal, but rather the search for common ground and reasonable consensus.

Reasons for “strongest”:
As a minority I enjoy such topics which represent acceptance of change in life.

Reasons for “weakest”:
This topic would be difficult because politics is a big subject to write about. One has to have a lot of knowledge about the political arena and its true impact on all that it touches.
Politics is not exactly an objective area to venture. There exist far too many views on what formation the goal of politics should take.
The topic of politics is a touchy subject because there are two dominant political parties in this country that move only to be at odds with one another, especially now that after 40 years we have Republican Congress. I'm sure it is only to get more interesting.
I don't like politics; it is not the most ideal topic for me.
Because I'm not so happy with the politic systems that actually I know and I don't have a real interest or knowledge about this topic.
I don't know that I could establish valid points on this essay. I don't know how well I would develop this topic -- that's a very broad topic compared to the other 17 questions.
This question is too specific and I am not sure I believe the facts given. I need prior knowledge on the topic.
It would cause difficulty for me because I could not offer any support for my thesis.
I don't know enough about the topic to base my opinion on.
I felt I did not know enough of the governments which were based on developing an ideal state. It seemed to be too platonic as it was concerned with ideal politics.