Tennessee Department of Education's
Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program
for English Language Arts

Grades 9–10 Writing

Practice Task II

2014–2015

TCAP Grades 9–10 Writing

Practice Task II

Directions

Student Directions

Today you will be taking the Grades 9–10 Writing Task. The task is made up of two texts and two prompts. For each prompt, you are to plan and write an essay about the text(s) according to the instructions provided. Your essays will be scored as rough drafts, but you should watch for careless errors.

There are some important things to remember as you complete the task:

- The time you have for reading both texts and answering the prompts will be 120 minutes.
- Read each prompt carefully and think about the best way to answer it.
- Write only about the texts and prompts you are given.
- You may complete pre-writing activities and notes before beginning your response, but do not write your response on the same pages as your pre-writing activities or notes.
- If you do not know the answer to a prompt, skip it and go on to the next prompt. You may return to it later if there is time.

Topic

An entrepreneur is someone who organizes and manages a business. This task will examine the characteristics that make up an entrepreneur from a couple of different perspectives.

Texts

- **"The Sure Thing"** by Malcolm Gladwell
- **"Epic Fails of the Startup World"** by James Surowiecki

Text 1

Text 1 Introduction

In this excerpt from **“The Sure Thing”** by **Malcolm Gladwell**, the author outlines the career of Ted Turner.

Please read “The Sure Thing” and then answer Prompt 1.

The Sure Thing

Malcolm Gladwell

In 1969, Ted Turner wanted to buy a television station. He was thirty years old. He had inherited a billboard business from his father, which was doing well. But he was bored, and television seemed exciting. “He knew absolutely nothing about it,” one of Turner’s many biographers, Christian Williams, writes in *Lead, Follow or Get Out of the Way* (1981). “It would be fun to risk everything he had built, scare the hell out of everybody, and get back in the front seat of the roller coaster.”

The station in question was WJRJ, Channel 17, in Atlanta. It was an independent station on the UHF band, the lonely part of the television spectrum which viewers needed a special antenna to find. It was housed in a run-down cinder-block building near a funeral home, leading to the joke that it was at death’s door. The equipment was falling apart. The staff was incompetent. It had no decent programming to speak of, and it was losing more than half a million dollars a year. Turner’s lawyer, Tench Coxe, and his accountant, Irwin Mazo, were firmly opposed to the idea. “We tried to make it clear that—yes—this thing might work, but if it doesn’t everything will collapse,” Mazo said, years later. “Everything you’ve got will be gone. . . . It wasn’t just us, either. Everybody told him not to do it.”

Turner didn’t listen. He was Captain Courageous, the man with nerves of steel who went on to win the America’s Cup, take on the networks, marry a movie star, and become a billionaire. He dressed like a cowboy. He gave the impression of signing contracts without looking at them. He was a drinker, a yeller, a man of unstoppable urges and impulses, the embodiment of the entrepreneur as risk-taker. He bought the station, and so began one of the great broadcasting empires of the twentieth century.

What is sometimes forgotten amid the mythology, however, is that Turner wasn’t the proprietor of any old billboard company. He had inherited the largest outdoor-advertising firm in the South, and billboards, in the nineteen-sixties and seventies, were enormously lucrative. They benefitted from favorable tax-depreciation rules, they didn’t require much capital investment, and they

Text 1

produced rivers of cash. WJRJ’s losses could be used to offset the taxes on the profits of Turner’s billboard business. A television station, furthermore, fit very nicely into his existing business. Television was about selling ads, and Turner was very experienced at ad-selling. WJRJ may have been a virtual unknown in the Atlanta market, but Turner had billboards all over the city that were blank about fifteen per cent of the time. He could advertise his new station free. As for programming, Turner had a fix for that, too. In those days, the networks offered their local affiliates a full slate of shows, and whenever an affiliate wanted to broadcast local programming, such as sports or news, the national shows were preëmpted. Turner realized that he could persuade the networks in New York to let him have whatever programming their affiliates weren’t running. That’s exactly what happened. “When we reached the point of having four preempted NBC shows running in our daytime lineup,” Turner writes in his autobiography, *Call Me Ted* (2008), “I had our people put up some billboards saying ‘THE NBC NETWORK MOVES TO CHANNEL 17.’ ”

Williams writes that Turner was “attracted to the risk” of the deal, but it seems just as plausible to say that he was attracted by the deal’s lack of risk. “We don’t want to put it all on the line, because the result can’t possibly be worth the risk,” Mazo recalls warning Turner. Put it all on the line? The purchase price for WJRJ was $2.5 million. Similar properties in that era went for many times that, and Turner paid with a stock swap engineered in such a way that he didn’t have to put a penny down. Within two years, the station was breaking even. By 1973, it was making a million dollars in profit. . . .

This is exactly how Turner pulled off another of his legendary early deals—his 1976 acquisition of the Atlanta Braves baseball team. Turner’s Channel 17 was the Braves’ local broadcaster, having acquired the rights four years before—a brilliant move as it turned out, because it forced every Braves fan in the region to go out and buy a UHF antenna. (Well before ESPN and Rupert Murdoch’s Sky TV, Turner had realized how important live sports programming could be in building a television brand.) The team was losing a million dollars a year, and the owners wanted ten million dollars to sell. That was four times the price of Channel 17. “I had no idea how I could afford it,” Turner told one of his biographers, although by this point the reader is wise to his aw-shucks modesty. First, he didn’t pay ten million dollars. He talked the Braves into taking a million down, and the rest over eight or so years. Second, he didn’t end up paying the million down. Somewhat mysteriously, Turner reports that he found a million dollars on the team’s books—money the previous owners somehow didn’t realize they had—and so, he says, “I bought it using its own money, which was quite a trick.” He now owed nine million dollars. But Turner had already been paying the Braves six hundred thousand dollars a year for the rights to broadcast sixty of the team’s games. What the deal consisted of, then, was his paying an additional six hundred thousand dollars or so a year, for eight years: in return, he would get the rights to all hundred and sixty-two of the team’s games, plus the team itself.

Text 1

You and I might not have made that deal. But that's not because Turner is a risk-taker and we are cowards. It's because Turner is a cold-blooded bargainer who could find a million dollars in someone's back pocket that the person didn't know he had. Once you get past the more flamboyant aspects of Turner's personal and sporting life, in fact, there is little evidence that he had any real appetite for risk at all.

Gladwell, Malcolm. "The Sure Thing." Jan. 18, 2010. *Gladwell.com*. Jan 18, 2010. Used by permission of the author. http://gladwell.com/the-sure-thing/

Prompt 1

You have now read "The Sure Thing." In this text, Malcolm Gladwell gives a portrayal of entrepreneur Ted Turner.

Write an essay that determines the central idea of the text and analyzes its development over the course of the text. Include how that central idea emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details. Be sure to cite evidence from the text to support your analysis. Follow the conventions of standard written English.

Text 2

Text 2 Introduction

In **“Epic Fails of the Startup World”** by **James Surowiecki**, the author examines the concept of failure in the entrepreneurial world.

Please read “Epic Fails of the Startup World” and then answer Prompt 2.

Epic Fails of the Startup World

James Surowiecki

We live in the age of the startup. It’s never been easier to build a product and start a company. And, thanks to the boom in angel investing[1] and crowdfunding, it’s never been easier for startups to raise money. The analytics firm CB Insights logged more than seventeen hundred seed-investment deals in the U.S. tech industry in 2012, more than three times the number from three years earlier. But there’s a catch: starting a company may be easier, but making it a success isn’t. Competition is fierce, profits are scarce, and venture capitalists aren’t generous when it comes to later stages of funding. As Gideon Lewis-Kraus shows in “No Exit,” a new Kindle Single about startup culture, the life of a new company is often brutish and short. Though we may be seeing a “Cambrian explosion[2]” of new companies, as *The Economist* recently put it, there’s a mass extinction going on, too.

The fact that most new businesses fail is hardly a secret. So why are so many people gambling on ventures that are likely to end badly? A traditional answer is that entrepreneurs are just more comfortable taking risks than the rest of us. The eighteenth-century Irish-French economist Richard Cantillon, who coined the term “entrepreneur,” defined it as a “bearer of risk.” And in 1921 the economist Frank Knight argued that the function of entrepreneurs was to “specialize in risk-taking.” Yet studies of entrepreneurs find that, in general, they’re as risk-averse as everyone else. Only when it comes to starting a business are they daring. And that’s because the fundamental characteristic of entrepreneurs isn’t risk-seeking; it’s self-confidence. A 1997 study in the *Journal of Business Venturing* found that entrepreneurs are overconfident about their ability to prevent bad outcomes. They’re also overconfident about the prospects of their business.

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[1] **angel investing:** the practice of a wealthy individual investing in a business start-up

[2] **Cambrian explosion:** the relatively rapid appearance of a great diversity of life during the early history of the Earth

Text 2

A 1988 study in the same journal of some three thousand entrepreneurs found that eighty-one percent thought their businesses had at least a seventy-percent chance of success, and a third thought there was no chance they would fail—numbers that bear no relation to reality. A recent paper called “Living Forever” notes that entrepreneurs are more likely than other people to overestimate their life spans.

Entrepreneurs may recognize that, in general, starting a business is risky. They just believe that their innate skills will win out. David S. Rose, a serial entrepreneur turned angel investor, and the author of the new book *Angel Investing*, told me, “You have to have an unreasonable level of confidence as an entrepreneur, or you’ll never get started.” This helps entrepreneurs keep going in what’s often a bleak and frightening endeavor. “Starting a company is extraordinarily difficult, even agonizing,” Rose said. “You need self-confidence and ego to get through it.” At the same time, the fact that so many entrepreneurs are convinced that they will succeed makes success less likely, by swelling the ranks of competitors. This dynamic was made famous by the economist H. Scott Gordon: in a 1954 essay, he noted that, because fishermen were “incurably optimistic” about their abilities to bring in a big catch, there were always too many fishermen working in the ocean, which, in turn, made it harder for them to earn a living.

In the startup world, endemic optimism is amplified by other factors. The ease of developing a product and getting seed money gives entrepreneurs a lot of positive feedback early on. The rise of “accelerators” like Y Combinator—which provide funding and also mentoring and networking services (a kind of boot camp for entrepreneurs)—has made building a business seem less risky. On top of this, there’s a widespread tendency to treat failure as a badge of honor: “Fail fast, fail often” is a familiar mantra in Silicon Valley. There’s now a regular FailCon, where people come to hear other entrepreneurs tell about the hard times they endured and about how starting a business and failing actually makes you more likely to succeed in the future. It’s a comforting message, but the evidence suggests that past failure really just predicts future failure. A 2009 study of venture-backed firms found that entrepreneurs who had failed in the past were not much more likely to succeed in new ventures than first-time entrepreneurs were—some eighty percent of those who had failed before failed again. A later study of more than eight thousand German ventures came to an even grimmer conclusion: founders who had previously failed were more likely to fail than novices.

You might suppose that entrepreneurs would be better off curbing their optimism. But we’ve built a whole system on unrealistic expectations. Because we don’t know how to identify good companies in advance, investors end up funding lots of them in the hope that a few will hit it big.

Text 2

As a character on the new HBO series “Silicon Valley” says of a V.C.[3], “You know how sea turtles have, like a . . . ton of babies because most of them die on the way down to the water? Peter just wants to make sure his money makes it to the ocean.” The economy has come to rely on this Darwinian process[4] to drive innovation. “Overconfidence means that many more companies start up than will ever succeed,” Brian Wu, a professor of strategy at the University of Michigan, told me. “That’s unfortunate for individual companies. The paradox is that it’s really beneficial for society.” In the delusions of entrepreneurs are the seeds of technological progress.

[3] **V.C.:** venture capitalist
[4] **Darwinian process:** the concept of “survival of the fittest,” as applied to business

Prompt 2

You have now read two texts about the entrepreneurs:

- **"The Sure Thing"** by Malcolm Gladwell
- **"Epic Fails of the Startup World"** by James Surowiecki

The two authors offer their views on entrepreneurs. Write an essay that argues what is the most important characteristic of an entrepreneur. Be sure to cite evidence from both texts to support your argument. Follow the conventions of standard written English.