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Practice Test 1

Scored Sample Essays with Rater Commentary for the Analytical Writing Argument Task

Argument Topic – Practice Test 1

The following is a memorandum from the business manager of a television station.

“Over the past year, our late-night news program has devoted increased time to national news and less time to weather and local news. During this time period, most of the complaints received from viewers were concerned with our station’s coverage of weather and local news. In addition, local businesses that used to advertise during our late-night news program have just canceled their advertising contracts with us. Therefore, in order to attract more viewers to the program and to avoid losing any further advertising revenues, we should restore the time devoted to weather and local news to its former level.”

Write a response in which you discuss what specific evidence is needed to evaluate the argument and explain how the evidence would weaken or strengthen the argument.

Note: All responses are reproduced exactly as written, including errors, misspellings, etc., if any.

Score 6

Essay Response

The decision to restore the time devoted to weather and local news to its former level is one that should be made with more careful consideration of evidence, data, and viewer/client feedback by the business manager of this television station. Many assumptions have been made on the business manager’s part about the exact cause of the problems with the program. He or she should approach the idea of making changes with more caution.

The memorandum stated that more complaints received from viewers were concerned with the station’s coverage of weather and local news, but it did not state the nature of the complaints. The viewers may have been complaining about the accuracy or quality of the weather and local news rather than the shortened length of the segments. More specific information about the complaints--including whether they were about the late-night edition or about other news programs during the day--would support the argument because it would show if there was a relationship between the shortened length of the segments in the late-night news program and the viewers’ dissatisfaction with these particular segments. Sometimes it is the personalities and the chemistry of the news anchors that govern people’s decisions about which station’s news they watch. The business manager will never know unless he asks the viewers exactly why they do or do not enjoy watching his news program.

Additionally, stated in the memorandum was the fact that local businesses had just canceled their advertising contracts with the station. An assumption being made is that the reason businesses were pulling their ads was directly related to the shortened segments of the weather and local news. Considering the fact that more than one business just pulled their ad, other factors could have been involved, such as any controversy that the station’s national news may have recently brought up. Janet Jackson’s notorious wardrobe malfunction comes to mind. Though that incident happened during a national sporting event, there are many controversial national news topics that have the potential to create such a stir with the local

public. If the manager could establish that businesses discontinued advertising contracts specifically because they were displeased with the change in news coverage, and that the remaining advertisers are on the verge of leaving if coverage of weather and local news is not increased, that information would help eliminate other possible explanations.

Evidence that research had been conducted to find specific ways to attract viewers to a news program would also strengthen the argument. Moreover, findings from research about what viewers would like to see on the program may help. Assuming that they would like to see more weather and local news does not seem safe. Perhaps they are looking for something besides national news, local news, and weather all together. Or possibly they are tuning into another station that has something in their program that draws their attention. Data about which ratings are highest and what people are watching would assist the business manager in his or her decision about how to change the program.

The station cannot expect to go back to the programming it once had and be successful. Obviously, something about the previous programming must not have been working; otherwise they would not have changed their structure the last time. They cannot expect to see different results if they go back to the same structure. Careful analysis of all the factors I have presented is the best first step to making a change in the structure of their news program.

Rater Commentary

This outstanding response clearly identifies specific evidence necessary to evaluate the argument, and explains lucidly why the evidence is necessary. This response does a particularly nice job of both identifying specific evidence that would strengthen the prompt's argument and identifying evidence that would undermine the argument. For example, the response notes that while the argument assumes that lost advertising contracts are the result of the station's decreased attention to weather and local news, myriad factors, this assumption is unsupported by specific evidence. The response then provides a cogent and thorough discussion of the kinds of evidence needed to examine this assumption and how the evidence might strengthen or weaken the prompt's argument. Each paragraph here is fully and cogently developed, and the response as a whole is organized logically. Finally, the response consistently demonstrates fluency and skillful use of language. For these reasons, the response earns a score of 6.

Score 5

Essay Response

As the business manager of the television station, I would be concerned with two things; the fact that there are fewer advertisers during the late-night news, and the increased complaints recieved from viewers about weather and local news. To support the argument that the station should restore the time devoted to weather and local news, I would carefully analyze the reasons for these factors.

In regards to the complaints recieved, I would gather specific accounts that address both the issue of weather and local news. Several recorded phone calls, emails, or letters would suffice

to show first-hand data that there is concern among some viewers. Next, I would do a thorough study into what percent of complaints are about news and weather, as opposed to other content of the program. If content complaints as well as specific weather and local-news related complaints are up, this would not support my argument.

If historical evidence about viewership and number of written grievances could be gathered, this would be even better. The station could look at the specific complaints, and number of comments from the previous year and compare them to this year's. Next, I would conduct surveys of viewers to understand the reasons why they watch the late- night news. I would also look at trends and variations among viewers of morning, evening, and late-night news. There is a chance that the demographics of individuals watching at these various times are completely different. A broad large-scale survey could be conducted to determine viewer interests. If other stations have taken such measures, perhaps this station could get a copy of results, to look at larger trends in the country. Before we assume that bringing back more local news and weather will increase our viewership, we need to understand why those individuals are not happy right now.

In terms of a stations success, funding from advertisers is very important. A station can run if they lack the audience, but have a financial backing; not the other way around. I would ask the advertisers who have dropped their contracts with the station why they did so. If the reasoning was because the receptionist was rude to them last time they called the station, then we could address that problem instead of rearranging our programing. We could also analyze what kinds of local advertisers are leaving. It could be that they have found more of an audience for their product advertising on another time-slot, or more specific special-interest cable channel that speaks more to their market. It would also be beneficial to speak with the advertisers as their marketing people may have better insight into the viewership of the late-night news than the station has. The previously mentioned viewer survey could have already been done by the local business advertisers, and this could help the station realign itself with the market. Though it might be difficult to coordinate, it would definately be advantageous to contact other local station to inquire about their contract status with the local bussinesses. A general lackluster response from community business could be a result of a larger-scale economic downturn, rather than the change in programing of one station. If the station wants the support back from local bussiness advertisers, it can't just make assumptions about what is driving contracts with television stations.

Lastly, if all evidence seemed to suggest that the decreased coverage of local news and weather was the reason for increased complaints from viewers and dropped contracts of local business advertisers, then there could be a test piolet week or month of heavier coverage of weather and local news during the late-night broadcasting. If complaints are still pouring in, it might be time to fire the news anchor- or at least to thouroughly analyze the possible consequense of and reasons for doing so.

Rater Commentary

This strong response offers a generally thoughtful and well-developed discussion of the specific evidence needed to evaluate the prompt's argument. In particular, the essay cites the need to obtain evidence detailing the nature and scope of the complaints, the preferences of the

audience, and the reasons for the cancelled advertising contracts. Although this response sometimes lacks the full and cogent development of a 6, it does indicate how and why different types of evidence are necessary for a thorough evaluation of the argument. The response also occasionally digresses from its discussion of the evidence needed to evaluate the argument into specific strategies the television station might use to gather the needed evidence. On the whole, the essay conveys ideas clearly and demonstrates facility with standard written English but the response does lack the fluency and precision of language necessary for a 6. For these reasons, the response warrants a score of 5.

Score 4

Essay Response

In order for this argument to be strengthened, specific details about the viewers complaining and the businesses that pulled advertising need to be elucidated.

First, the station should be concerned about what the viewers are specifically complaining about in regards to the weather and local news coverage. It is possible that the viewers were complaining for various reasons, which may include the following: the anchorperson or weatherperson, and their physical appearance, or delivery of the news/weather, the quality of the graphics being used during these segments, or the quality or choice of the stories covered. The television station needs to determine the exact complaints, for it would strengthen the above argument if the complaints were specifically about the time spent on the local news and weather.

Along the lines of clarity, the station needs to determine the reasons why local businesses cancelled their advertising contracts. Alternative reasons for this may include another station offering cheaper air time during the same time slot, the local economy going bad, leading to these companies needing to cut costs in advertising, or consumer reports for the companies that detail better times to advertise to their customers. The television station may be losing these advertising contracts for other reasons than time devoted to local news and weather.

Finally, a closer look at viewer numbers might strengthen the argument that time spent on local news and weather is affecting this aspect. Support for this memorandum would come in the form of viewer percentages dropping the after the time devoted to national news increased. The business manager should make sure that the viewer numbers did not increase over the past year because of the increase in national news coverage. This would invalidate the argument in regards to attracting more viewers.

In conclusion, to strengthen or support the argument that restoring the time devoted to local news and weather would attract new viewers and avoid losing contracts, the business manager needs to outline that the complaints from viewers and cancelling of advertising contracts specifically occurred because of the shift to increased national news coverage.

Rater Commentary

This response earns a score of 4 by demonstrating competence both in its analysis of the argument and in its control of language. The response opens by noting the need for “specific details about the viewers complaining and the businesses that pulled advertising.” It goes on to discuss how evidence suggesting alternative explanations for the viewer complaints and loss of advertising would undermine the argument. Although the essay provides some satisfactory

support for and development of its analysis, the analysis as a whole is competent rather than generally thoughtful. Similarly, the response conveys meaning with only acceptable clarity.

Score 3

Essay Response

The aforementioned argument is a quality assessment of a potentially costly situation. In order for the news agency to ensure its continued success at the level that they once were it is absolutely necessary that they return to the level of local news that they once had. The argument that has been presented to me seems to be logical one. There is a clear statement of the problem and there is a significant amount of detail that leads Raters to see that the decline in the amount of business that the station does is directly related to the dereliction that it is given to the local news.

However, in order to make this argument stronger than it already is, I think that there are certain things that could be added to bolster the information that is already here. First of all, it may be necessary to include some sort of survey results from both the community and local businesses to ensure that the reason that they have withdrawn their business is because of the program's focus shift. It may be possible that this station is merely doing a bad job at delivering the news and that this is the reason for the decline.

It is important to make sure the motivation for changing formats is the correct one.

Secondly, it should be noted that it is important to examine the complaints that were received during this time period. The information provided does not specify whether there was a spike in the amount of complaints that were coming in, or whether it was merely the same amount as usual. This would also be a point that needs to be examined closely before any definite decision could be made.

All in all, I think that the information that has been provided here is a sound and logical argument for returning the news back to the original format. However, I also feel that if the suggestions that I made were taken seriously, then it may be possible to make this argument even better than it originally was.

Rater Commentary

Although the response seems largely to accept the argument's claims, it demonstrates some competence in addressing the task by noting the need for information that could "bolster the information that is already there." The response goes on to question whether advertisers might have withdrawn for other reasons and whether the level of viewer complaints was any different from the usual, but the discussion does not go much beyond emphasizing the need for information. Moreover, though the discussion *implies* how particular pieces of evidence would strengthen the response, it does not articulate an explanation. Organization here is adequate, and control of language, though somewhat uneven, is sufficient to convey ideas with acceptable clarity. In short, the response's organization and control of language might be sufficient to warrant an upper-half score, the response must receive a score of 3 due to its limited development of relevant analysis.

Score 2

Essay Response

In this passage, it is evident that the problem began when the formation of the station time had changed. There is a need for local and weather news in the late-night news programs. What is being targeted here is that if the late-nightly news is for local viewers, then local viewers should get the local news and weather followed by the world news. As Americans are affected by what is happening in the world, but the most affected news is of what is happening in the 'back yard.'

There has to be a compromise in news watching. There may be news that affects us in a far instead of up close. Most Americans want to know what happened near by, while others want to know what happened far away. Before the circulation had changed, the news station should have given a poll of all the late-night viewers to determine which program would be more beneficial to them, world news or local/weather news.

In late-night news, the only viewers who would view this are the viewers who would be up late, which means these people work through the afternoon and evenings and miss the news broadcast at this time. The early day viewers usually watch the news during the morning and evening news. Even though the late-night viewers are watching the news, they still want to see what tomorrow will bring as far as controversy in the neighborhood or rain. Advertisements should be played mostly during the evening and the nightly news for better response to the ads. Most Americans work morning to evening and watch the evening and nightly news.

With this news program playing in the late-night, most views are not affected by it. When the news is playing and there is crucial information that needs to be heard, there are some Americans who rarely want to look at local advertisement, especially since they may be sleeping or working during the regular business hours of the advertiser.

There are many points that can be argued on the late-night news mainly because it is late-night. It does not affect the majority of the American population because they are mostly sleeping. For a company who is advertising during this time frame, there should be an inclusion in the contract with the news company that states the advertisement that plays on late-night news should also play on the morning news or on the evening news. With this exposure, the contract would be satisfied.

Rater Commentary

Rather than identifying specific evidence needed to evaluate the prompt's argument, this response consists largely of a lengthy discussion of why and when people watch news programs. The essay's only acknowledgement of the assigned task appears in the second paragraph where the writer suggests that the station "should have given a poll" to determine what kind of information late-night viewers want. However, this call for additional evidence is not developed or supported in any way. The response also suffers from errors in usage, grammar, and syntax that can interfere with meaning (for example, in such sentences as "When the news is playing and there is crucial information that needs to be heard, there are some Americans who rarely want to look at local advertisement, especially since they may be sleeping or working during the regular business hours of the advertiser"). Although these errors are not frequent or serious enough to rule out a score of 3, the response must, nevertheless, receive a score of 2 because it largely disregards the specific task directions.

Score 1

Essay Response

The viewers concern local news. The local businesses want advertising.

I think the business manager should decrease national news for a television station will increase weather and local news. The local Advertising will be come back. The programs should have national news, local news, weather and advertising. The manager must be look for the stucture of the TV time.

In conclusion, I think the manager should restores the time to national news and talk with local business advertising for a television station.

Rater Commentary

Although this response suggests some slight understanding of the argument's content and provides some visual cues that suggest organization, it suffers from pervasive errors in grammar and sentence structure that result in near-incoherence. Thus, the appropriate score is a 1.