

Question 3

(Suggested time—40 minutes. This question counts for one-third of the total essay section score.)

Consider the distinct perspectives expressed in the following statements.

If you develop the absolute sense of certainty that powerful beliefs provide, then you can get yourself to accomplish virtually anything, including those things that other people are certain are impossible.

*William Lyon Phelps, American educator, journalist, and professor (1865–1943)*

I think we ought always to entertain our opinions with some measure of doubt. I shouldn't wish people dogmatically to believe any philosophy, not even mine.

*Bertrand Russell, British author, mathematician, and philosopher (1872–1970)*

In a well-organized essay, take a position on the relationship between certainty and doubt. Support your argument with appropriate evidence and examples.

**STOP**

**END OF EXAM**

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The score should reflect a judgment of the essay's quality as a whole. Remember that students had only 40 minutes to read and write; the essay, therefore, is not a finished product and should not be judged by standards appropriate for an out-of-class assignment. Evaluate the essay as a draft, making certain to reward students for what they do well.

All essays, even those scored 8 or 9, may contain occasional lapses in analysis, prose style, or mechanics. Such features should enter into the holistic evaluation of an essay's overall quality. In no case may an essay with many distracting errors in grammar and mechanics be scored higher than a 2.

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- 9 Essays earning a score of 9 meet the criteria for a score of 8 and, in addition, are especially sophisticated in their argument, thorough in their development, or particularly impressive in their control of language.

### 8 Effective

Essays earning a score of 8 **effectively** develop a position on the relationship between certainty and doubt. The evidence and explanations used are appropriate and convincing, and the argument is especially coherent and well developed. The prose demonstrates a consistent ability to control a wide range of the elements of effective writing but is not necessarily flawless.

- 7 Essays earning a score of 7 meet the criteria for a score of 6 but provide a more complete explanation, more thorough development, or a more mature prose style.

### 6 Adequate

Essays earning a score of 6 **adequately** develop a position on the relationship between certainty and doubt. The evidence and explanations used are appropriate and sufficient, and the argument is coherent and adequately developed. The writing may contain lapses in diction or syntax, but generally the prose is clear.

- 5 Essays earning a score of 5 develop a position on the relationship between certainty and doubt. The evidence or explanations used may be uneven, inconsistent, or limited. The writing may contain lapses in diction or syntax, but it usually conveys the student's ideas.

### 4 Inadequate

Essays earning a score of 4 **inadequately** develop a position on the relationship between certainty and doubt. The evidence or explanations used may be inappropriate, insufficient, or less convincing. The argument may have lapses in coherence or be inadequately developed. The prose generally conveys the student's ideas but may be less consistent in controlling the elements of effective writing.

- 3 Essays earning a score of 3 meet the criteria for a score of 4 but demonstrate less success in developing a position on the relationship between certainty and doubt. The essays may show less maturity in control of writing.

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### Question 3 (continued)

#### 2 Little Success

Essays earning a score of 2 demonstrate **little success** in developing a position on the relationship between certainty and doubt. These essays may misunderstand the prompt or substitute a simpler task by responding to the prompt tangentially with unrelated, inaccurate, or inappropriate explanation. The prose often demonstrates consistent weaknesses in writing, such as grammatical problems, a lack of development or organization, or a lack of coherence and control.

- 1** Essays earning a score of 1 meet the criteria for a score of 2 but are undeveloped, especially simplistic in their explanation and argument, weak in their control of language, or especially lacking in coherence and development.
- 0** Indicates an off-topic response, one that merely repeats the prompt, an entirely crossed-out response, a drawing, or a response in a language other than English.
- Indicates an entirely blank response.

### Sample 3A

Our world is constantly wrought with the concept that certainty can allow one to achieve all of one's desires, dreams, and destinies. However, this ever-present idea is utterly misleading. One cannot rely on certainty because nothing is truly certain. Everything that we hold to be true hasn't been proven wrong, but who is to say that it couldn't be? There is no pre-determined power that states if one is completely transfixed and certain, that they will be able to conquer all that believes otherwise. Doubt, in many ways, can be a comfort. Doubt allows us to question and challenge those certainties. Without doubt, our society would be merely an impenetrable reality in which creativity and ingenuity would be disregarded. Certainty is a safety blanket that covers the possible truths underneath.

In history, countless examples of doubt have changed the world as we know it. One of the most glaring of these is sending men into space and, from space, landing on the moon. This was thought to be absolute nonsense just a mere 20 or 30 years before it happened. Science fiction seemed to be becoming a reality. Although science fiction to many seemed to have no basis of truth, there are more and more connections being made between ridiculous or ludicrous concepts then, but undeniable realities now. One of the most important components of doubt is trial and error. One cannot be certain something will make sense or work if one has not tested this concept, whether by experimentation or refutation. For example, if Thomas Edison was absolutely certain he had created a means to harness electricity and produce light, but not tested it over 50 times, his certainty would be invalid. However, his influx of doubt, and therefore his willingness to augment and change based upon that doubt, enabled him to produce what could be the most important scientific discovery of our age.

Yet another example of the importance of doubt is perhaps the most controversial topic among us, the doubt of religion. Whether or not one has faith and is certain of that faith, is irrefutable. There are, hence, two sides to this. Because nothing has been definitively proved to cause that a higher, supreme power exists, then why could there not be one present? On the other hand, because there has been no evidence of such a thing, why does there have to be one? However, even in this process of comparing the two sides, one is doubting because one is extrapolating that either could be true. If either is true, we are uncertain.

In conclusion, the use of doubt has brought upon many debates, changes, and ideas, whether for better or worse. This debate of uncertainty or certainty has been entrenched in our culture's consciousness, possibly since its inception. But if we were to deny that the geniuses of our times did not doubt, we are making a vast and unintelligent assumption. Without the doubts of people like Charles Rutherford or Niels Bohr, who revolutionized the model of the atom, or Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, who provided arguments against the Alien and Sedition Acts rather than accept that they are certain, our world would not be anything like the way it is. One thing is certain; Doubt is an absolute necessity.

### Sample 3B

It is true that certainty can help us achieve great things, but if this were always the case, why would people ever experience doubtful feelings? The reason for this is that doubts can help us create limits and help us know how much of something we can handle. People need to know when to trust themselves, and accordingly be certain or doubtful at the right times. Phelps and Russell both show valid points in that feelings of certainty and doubt have their times to be the more prominent feeling, but they need to be situational.

Like Phelps states, with a sense of certainty, "you can get yourself to accomplish virtually anything." In many cases, this is true. For example, when going into a big test, it is more useful to be certain in your knowledge and ability to answer the questions correctly. Doubt can create uncertainty in times like this, and it is more likely that an incorrect answer will be chosen. I also personally know that certainty is more important in certain circumstances. When I play softball, I know that if I am certain that I will play well, I will have more confidence and actually do better because I was in the right mindset.

In a bigger, more important view, certainty can be used to achieve greater things, like the creation of our government and breaking away from England. When Americans were uncertain that they should become independent, they were afraid, so they were forced to wait until they were confident that they could do just fine as an independent country and were free of England's rules. Certainty can achieve great things when it brings confidence.

Although certainty can help bring about an important sense of achievement, people need to know their limits and when to doubt whether something is too much. A perfect example of this can be seen in Jon Krakauer's "Into the Wild," where Chris McCandless' tragic death comes inevitably when he believes he can live all by himself in the wild. He believed he could take care of himself, and that there was nothing out there that could stop him. Some doubt as to whether he knew everything necessary or whether he had all the correct supplies could have saved his life. This shows how doubt is sometimes necessary to create a person's limits.

While Phelps claims that certainty is most important, Russell claims that we should always have some measure of doubt. In actuality, they are both correct; there are just appropriate times for each. Certainty can help a person achieve great things, but some doubt must be present at times to define the limits available to a person. This doubt could save a life.

### Sample 3C

I believe that if you are certain you can achieve something, then you should not doubt yourself. The quote by William Lyon Phelps means to me that if you are certain you can do anything, then you can, no matter what others believe. I completely agree with this quote because if you have absolute confidence in yourself, you have no reason to doubt your abilities. The best example of this is my lacrosse team. We went into our playoff game completely confident and without a doubt in our minds that we would win, and in the end, we earned the victory we worked so hard for. You cannot live life doubting yourself because those doubts turn into insecurities and fear, causing you not to live life to its full potential. When faced with an obstacle, be certain that you will overcome it and have the confidence to know that you will.

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### Question 3

#### Overview

This question asked students to make an argument about the relationship between certainty and doubt. The prompt introduced the topic by presenting short quotations from the works of two 20th-century philosophers. One excerpt celebrates certainty, and the other champions doubt. The question that follows these short quotations does not specifically refer the student back to either or both of the quotations, thus giving the student permission to launch into any number of legitimate discussions of the relationship between certainty and doubt.

The first passage, from William Lyon Phelps, presents “certainty” in terms of inner motivation, confidence, and determination informed by “powerful beliefs.” The passage from Bertrand Russell, however, situates doubt in the context of opinions and belief systems that reside primarily within the culture, of which the individual is only a part. The open-endedness of the prompt and the dilemma presented by the somewhat mismatched quotations were, however, felicitous for many students. They could legitimately and successfully respond to the prompt from a multiplicity of angles, finding various points of entry into an argument about the relationship between certainty and doubt. They could, for instance, define certainty and doubt as virtues or vices, as attitudes, or as intellectual practices. They could observe certainty or doubt, or both, in their own lives or in the world around them, as well as in texts they had seen, heard, or read. They could consider how certainty or doubt operated in the lives of historical figures or present-day celebrities.

#### Sample: 3A

**Score: 8**

The student’s argument in this effective essay focuses on the productive power of doubt insofar as it allows for the questioning and challenging of certainties and the stimulation of creativity, ingenuity, and progress. The student cites the example of space exploration in order to demonstrate that certainty — man was earth-bound and only fanciful science fiction entertained the once ludicrous idea of space exploration — must be constantly challenged in order for progress to be made. In the second example of productive doubt, the student considers the relationship between doubt and certainty in the logic of experimentation. Thomas Edison was certain of his scientific breakthrough but not until he confronted constant doubt fueled by over fifty unsuccessful attempts at harnessing electricity and producing light. This effective essay is not without flaws: the student, even in the effective examples cited above, does not always control the terms “certainty” and “doubt” with absolute clarity. The final example of religious faith is the most elliptical in its usage of these terms, as in the essay’s claim that “even in this process of comparing the two sides one is doubting, because one is extrapolating that either could be true. If either are true, we are uncertain.” Such flaws, however, are understandable in the draft of such an ambitious essay, one that works at a high level of abstraction. Taken as a whole, the essay effectively establishes a position on the relation between certainty and doubt by using appropriate and convincing examples to develop the idea of productive doubt.

#### Sample: 3B

**Score: 6**

The student finds adequate support for both Phelps’s and Russell’s claims, ultimately determining that “certainty can help us to achieve great things” but also cautioning that in some situations certainty must be moderated by doubt. In one appropriate example, a test taker is more likely to do well on a test when confident, rather than doubtful. In another, McCandless in *Into the Wild* might not have perished had he entertained a useful measure of doubt about his ability to survive in hostile terrain. Both examples present sensible approaches to assessing the meaning of the abstract terms, certainty and doubt, and are sufficiently developed. Less strong is the example of the American colonists, with its premise that the colonists were

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**Question 3 (continued)**

successful in breaking away from England because they were confident that “they could do just fine as an independent country.” The essay demonstrates adequate control of language, and despite the inclusion of the weaker example, sufficiently develops a nuanced position on the relationship between certainty and doubt.

**Sample: 3C**

**Score: 2**

The essay consists mainly of paraphrases of Phelps and insufficiently tested generalities (for example, “if you are certain you can do anything, than [*sic*] you can, no matter what others believe”). The single example of the student’s lacrosse team, meant to testify to the power of certainty, lacks enough detail and discussion to be convincing. Without any consideration of Russell’s claim about doubt and without much development of Phelps’s idea, the essay demonstrates little success in taking a position on the relationship between certainty and doubt.