

How to Approach the Constructed-Response Questions

Let's look back at a case history and a sample constructed-response question based on that case history from Chapter 4.

Scenario: Jason

Jason is an eighth-grade student in Mr. Pope's health class. Jason shows great interest in the course content, actively participates in class, and responds well to Mr. Pope's enthusiastic and positive teaching style. Jason does very well with an assignment that Mr. Pope designed for a test grade and repeats once a month throughout the marking period. Below is a brief synopsis of the assignment:

Find an article related to health and fitness on the Internet or in a magazine. Write a summary of the article that includes at least three main health-related points of the article and then make one connection between the article and your knowledge/experiences. Be sure to cite your article and its source properly.

Mr. Pope introduced this assignment by providing a model and then offering direct instruction on how to write the summary. He also gave examples of personal connections between the article and his knowledge and experiences and showed the students how to add this information to the end of the summary. Mr. Pope modeled his writing process by thinking aloud and actually demonstrating his writing using the overhead projector. Mr. Pope teamed up with his eighth-grade English teaching colleague and planned to teach how to cite Internet sources and periodicals carefully. The two devised a guide sheet that they provided to students and turned into a poster for both of their classrooms.

Jason earned a B on his first health summary because he misunderstood or did not read some of the directions carefully. In addition, the assignment was one day late. Jason was discouraged that he forgot his homework on his desk at home, which is a problem he often has with homework. Mr. Pope has noticed that Jason's health binder is usually disorganized, and Jason frequently forgets to bring a pencil to class.

Mr. Pope reviewed the second health summary assignment individually with Jason, checking with Jason to make sure that he had an appropriate article a week before the assignment was due. He also had his class work in pairs to discuss real-life connections to the topics of their articles during class time a few days before the next summaries were due. On the second assignment, Jason earned an A. He continued to earn A's on his other summary assignments, with the exception of one, which was late. Jason became an active class contributor and appeared confident in his abilities to find health-related information on the Internet and in magazines, as well as in his ability to write a summary.

Sample Constructed-Response Question

Identify TWO strengths of Mr. Pope's health assignment. Explain how each strength demonstrates aspects of effective planning. Be sure to base your response on the principles of planning instruction.

As you can see, the constructed-response questions are made up of a case history for you to read and then followed by a question that requires you to provide a short answer. In this next section, I have some suggested approaches for you to try for the constructed-response questions on your PLT test.

CliffsTestPrep Strategies for the Constructed-Response Questions

Here are some suggested *CliffsTestPrep* strategies for answering constructed-response questions:

1. **Read the questions first.** Remember, you are reading each case history in order to get the answers to the questions right. Before you spend time reading the case history, think about *why* you are reading it!
2. **Actively read each case history.** Take notes, keep your mind on the questions, and think as you read. You'll find more on this a bit later in this chapter.

- 3. Reread each question and make a brief plan or sketch of your response points.** For example, a brief plan for the sample question about the strengths of Mr. Pope’s lesson might look like this:

Strength ONE
Specific example
Explanation
Strength TWO
Specific example
Explanation

- 4. Review the case history.** Make sure that you have referred specifically to the case history and have included two strong points (or as many points as the question requires) with examples and details.
- 5. Review your response.** Were you clear, concise, specific, and accurate? Did you base your response on the principles of learning and teaching? Did you answer all parts of the question? Beware of the two-part constructed-response question! These questions ask about two points rather than just one. The length of your response will vary on the question. In general, you will write a one to two paragraph response. It is okay for you to use bulleted lists or brief examples. You do not need to have perfectly written paragraphs to earn a high score. The most important aspect of your response is the content you write and the accuracy of the examples you provide.
- 6. Be mindful of your testing time.** You have 2 hours total to read four case histories, answer six constructed-response questions, and answer 24 multiple-choice questions. Each test-taker will need a different amount of time to respond to a constructed-response question accurately and completely, so I cannot give you a specific time to spend on each case history. You’ll have to practice your timing before the actual test. Constructed-response questions are likely to take more of your testing time, so practice the full-length tests at the back of this book with your watch in hand. Be sure to check your watch at the start of the test and then every 30 minutes. You want to be halfway through the full-length test after 1 hour.

How to Read a Case History

Now that you better understand how to approach the constructed-response questions, you're ready to look more closely at the case history itself. All case histories on the test are approximately the same length, 800 to 850 words, and each one is followed by three constructed-response questions. None of the cases requires knowledge from specific academic areas, such as science, social studies, mathematics, or English language arts; rather, the questions seek your knowledge of the four categories on the PLT:

- Students as Learners
- Instruction and Assessment
- Communication Techniques
- Teacher Professionalism

The next important thing you need to remember is that there are two types of case histories on the PLT test:

- Teacher-based
- Student-based

Teacher-Based PLT Cases

Teacher-based case histories examine the teaching practice of one or more teachers. This type of case history will include enough information about the teaching context, lesson goals, objectives, lesson plans, teaching strategies, and interactions with students to help you identify issues of teaching and learning involved in the situation so that you can respond to the questions about the teacher's practice. It is never acceptable to respond that there is not enough information for you to respond to the question. There is always enough required information included for you to come up with an answer. You also need to be able to offer new examples or suggestions, and not just repeat an example or teaching idea presented in the case history.

You can rest assured that the teaching examples are positive, and you will not be asked to make value judgments about a teacher's practice. A case history may ask you to provide an additional teaching idea or another way of looking at the teaching and learning discussed in the case.

Student-Based PLT Cases

Student-based cases examine one student and include specific information about the student's background, strengths, or weaknesses. These cases may include examples of student work, excerpts of classroom conversations, and descriptions of the student's classroom learning. As with the teacher-based cases, the case history will provide all the information you need to respond to the question. Remember, too, that there is nothing "wrong" with the student. Teachers must demonstrate positive approaches to teaching *all* children, even those who have difficulty learning in a classroom setting.

Two Different Formats

Both teacher-based case histories and student-based case histories can be presented in one of two formats—document-based and narrative.

Document-Based

Document-based case histories consist of three or more documents that relate to the teacher or student-based case. Teacher-based cases might include lesson plans; assignments; student work; notes from a principal, parent, or mentor; or teacher journals. Student-based cases might include excerpts from class discussions, conversations between teachers and colleagues, student records, student work samples, or notes from parents, counselors, or colleagues.

Narrative-Based

Narrative-based case histories present a nonjudgmental account of a teaching or learning situation—in a school, in a set of classrooms, or in a class. This type of case history provides an excerpt of a situation. You do not know everything that is happening in this teaching or learning situation. When answering the questions, you *can* assume that the information about the teacher or student that is included is valuable.

Suggested Strategies for Reading Case Histories

Remember to read the constructed-response questions first and then:

1. Read the case history carefully, closely, and actively.

By carefully, I mean read slowly enough to comprehend what you've read. By closely, I suggest that you keep the major content categories in mind (see Chapter 7). By actively, I mean to make margin notes, underline key points, and think about why this information is included.

2. Ask questions as you read.

What issues about teaching and learning does this case history raise? How might the teacher help the student(s) in this situation? How else might the teacher or student resolve the issues presented?

3. Keep in mind that all information is there for a reason.

This is why you read the constructed-response questions before reading the case history. As you read the case history, ask yourself how the information presented in the case history addresses each question.

Scoring Guide

This section of the chapter helps you focus on how to earn the highest score. It can also help you better understand what makes a less effective response. You'll see that your answers need to be *complete, relevant, appropriate, thorough, and specific to the principles of teaching and learning*. While an appropriate response must be legible and accurate content-wise, note that you are not required to use perfect spelling, grammar, or handwriting.

Criteria for Scoring

Constructed-response questions are scored on a 0-2-point scale. The Educational Testing Service offers the following general framework for scoring constructed responses:

A response that earns a score of 2:

- Demonstrates complete understanding of the parts of the case that are relevant to the question
- Responds appropriately to all parts of the question
- When an explanation is required, provides a thorough explanation that is well supported by relevant examples
- Demonstrates a strong knowledge of pedagogical concepts, theories, facts, procedures, or methods relevant to the question

A response that earns a score of 1:

- Demonstrates a basic understanding of the parts of the case that are relevant to the question
- Responds appropriately to one portion of the question
- When an explanation is required, provides a weak explanation supported by relevant evidence
- Demonstrates some knowledge of pedagogical concepts, theories, facts, procedures, or methods relevant to the question

A response that earns a score of 0:

- Demonstrates misunderstanding of the parts of the case that are relevant to the question
- Does not respond appropriately to the question
- Is not supported by relevant evidence
- Demonstrates little knowledge of pedagogical concepts, theories, facts, procedures, or methods relevant to the question

No credit is given for blank or off-topic responses.

How Is an “Appropriate Response” Determined?

The ETS uses the term *appropriate* in its scoring guide. It's important that you consider how the ETS scorers determine “appropriate responses”:

- Two or three education experts are asked to read case histories and answer the questions.
- Benchmark papers are selected from individuals who have agreed to participate in a pilot test. In other words, your test is not used to train scorers!
- The test writer uses the experts' “model answers” to develop a specific scoring guide for each case history and its questions. These models become examples of correct answers, not *the* correct answers.
- Next, the specific scoring guide is used to select model answers that serve as “benchmark papers” for training scorers for your exam.

- During the training session and when reading benchmark papers, scorers can add new answers to the scoring guide as they see fit.
- Training sessions are designed to train scorers to use benchmark papers and the specific scoring guide, not their own opinions or preferences.

How to Use the Scoring Criteria to Assess Your Own Responses

You can share your preview test or one of the upcoming full-length practice tests with an experienced teacher or educator and ask him or her to use the scoring guide to provide feedback to you. You may also want to assess your own responses and make sure you are addressing all the important aspects of each question.

While the ETS has set up a reliable and valid way to score test-takers' written responses, you may have concerns about how your own constructed responses are scored. You can request and pay for your score to be verified. See the website www.ets.org/praxis for more information.

Apply the *CliffsTestPrep* Strategies

In this section, you'll have a chance to try out the strategies I've gone over in this chapter. It's important to practice the suggested strategies to make sure that you feel comfortable approaching the constructed-response questions in this way. If you find an approach that works better for you and you're getting the credited responses, you should use it.

Try the suggested strategies with the following case history and its three constructed-response questions. If you'd like more practice reading case histories and answering constructed-response questions, turn to any of the full-length practice tests in Part IV of this book.

Case I

Directions: Questions 1–3 require you to write short answers, or “constructed responses.” You are not expected to cite specific theories or texts in your answers; however, your knowledge of specific principles of learning and teaching will be evaluated. Be sure to answer all parts of the question. Write your answers in the space provided.

Scenario: Justin

Justin is an 11-year-old boy in the fifth grade. He is taller and heavier than most children in his age group, yet socially and emotionally he appears to be less mature. He recently moved with his three older sisters, father, and mother, who is a naval officer, to a school district that largely serves a Navy community since there is a military base within walking distance of the school. Justin has moved five times in his life and is very quiet on the first days of school. After those first few days, he has more overt difficulties. Mr. Hole is concerned that Justin may not be adjusting well to his new classroom, school, and community.

Mr. Hole does not have a cumulative record for Justin since it takes the school system several days, sometimes weeks, to request and obtain records through the central administration department in this large district that serves many transient students. This is a common problem in the school system and one that Mr. Hole has learned to work around. He has planned several “get-to-know-you” activities during the first weeks of school. Based on early observations and pre-testing, Mr. Hole has the following assessments to report to the Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT) in late September:

- On the first few days of school, Justin wore his hood over his head and face and was very quiet. He seemed to observe the happenings in the classroom with interest, but did not participate in any discussions or activities. He was compliant when it came time to go to lunch, recess, and specialists' classes, such as Art, Music, and Physical Education. At lunch and recess, he sat alone.
- Justin has difficulty following class rules, especially raising his hand, taking turns, and remaining in his own personal space during work time and when walking in the hallway.
- On September 10, Justin initiated an argument in the coatroom that escalated to shouts and Justin throwing his backpack at a fellow student.
- Justin's instructional reading level is at the beginning of grade 3. His comprehension appears to be very weak, yet his vocabulary and word recognition skills are strong.
- Justin is also below grade-level expectations in mathematics. He has difficulty with multiplication and division as well as problem-solving that requires two or more steps.
- On September 15, Justin and another boy were observed taking candy from the teacher's desk. While the other boy admitted his part in the incident, Justin adamantly denied that he took the candy.
- Justin enjoys drawing and music.
- On September 23, Justin took a new set of crayons from a boy in class, broke each one in half, and left them on the student's desk.
- On the same day, Justin had a fistfight on the playground and was suspended from school.

Mr. Hole is concerned about Justin's adjustment to his new school. He knows that students who move a lot, such as those like Justin who come from military families, often have gaps in academics, low self-esteem, or difficulty behaving. Mr. Hole has thought carefully about Justin's learning situation and has tried the following strategies to support Justin's transition to his new school and classroom before requesting the MDT meeting on Justin's behalf:

- "Classroom buddy"—A student who has also moved frequently and is high-achieving and polite has been assigned to help Justin as needed.
- Individual attention—Mr. Hole has allowed Justin to do special jobs for the teacher and has spent one-to-one time with him during a special "lunch with the teacher."
- Authentic praise—Mr. Hole has made a point to recognize Justin's positive contributions to the classroom and in his individual work.
- Lower-than-grade-level tasks—Mr. Hole has given Justin mathematics problems and reading materials at his instructional level. This has led to some social difficulties, though, because Justin is the only student performing this far below grade level.
- Home/school communication—Mr. Hole has communicated with Justin's family by phone and in one parent-teacher conference. Justin's family appears to be concerned about and involved in Justin's educational progress. The parents reported that Justin has had difficulty with behavior at other schools and has frequent outbursts at home.

The Multi-Disciplinary Team reviewed this information and samples of Justin's work and determined that Justin should be evaluated by the school psychologist and an educational diagnostician to determine the cause of his behavioral difficulties and his below-grade-level performance.

1. Identify TWO additional strategies that Mr. Hole could use to support Justin's learning in his fifth-grade classroom while he waits for results from the school psychologist and the educational diagnostician. Be sure to base your response on the principles of learning and teaching.
2. Identify TWO potential reasons for Justin's behavior and academic performance in fifth grade. Be sure to base your answer on the principles of learning and teaching.
3. Suggest TWO additional ways that Mr. Hole and Justin's parents can work together to support Justin's behavior and academic performance in school. Be sure to base your response on the principles of learning and teaching.

Answers and Explanations

1. This question requires you to read carefully about Mr. Hole's attempts to help Justin and to describe two new ideas that Mr. Hole has not tried. These ideas must be grounded in principles of learning and teaching. You may have other "reasonable responses" that would be considered exemplary responses by the ETS. The points below are just examples, so you'll want to ask an experienced educator to read *your* response for specific feedback and suggestions. These ideas are not written as complete responses to the PLT; rather, this section provides suggested content. You will find sample responses at the end of each of the practice tests in Part IV of this book. Here are a couple of suggestions you could offer Mr. Hole:

 - Clearly review the classroom rules and expectations that the class as a group has determined and then start a behavior plan for Justin that includes natural consequences for his choices. Glasser's "choice theory" suggests that students must have choices, clear expectations, and natural consequences for their actions.
 - Try placing Justin in a heterogeneous cooperative group for reading or math work instead of providing individual work. Students working in effective cooperative groups develop a sense of camaraderie, and peer support often provides intrinsic motivation for students to make positive contributions to the group.
2. This question requires you to analyze and synthesize all the information presented in the case. Mr. Hole does not have access to Justin's previous student record, so he needs to hypothesize what may be the reasons behind Justin's behavior and academic performance. These ideas must be grounded in principles of learning and teaching. You may have other "reasonable responses" that would be considered exemplary responses by the ETS. These ideas are not written as complete responses to the PLT; instead, this section provides suggested content. You will find sample responses at the end of each of the practice tests in Part IV of this book. You'll want to ask an experienced educator to read *your* response for specific feedback and suggestions. Here are a couple of reasons why a student may present learning behaviors such as those in Justin's case:

 - Justin could be upset about his recent move and the many times he has had to meet new teachers and make new friends. Students whose families move a lot may experience diminished self-esteem or behavior problems.
 - Justin could have a behavior disorder. Mr. Hole has observed withdrawn behavior, acting out, stealing, difficulty with rules, and aggression toward people. These are behavioral indicators of a behavior disorder. It is the teacher's role to report behaviors and the MDT's role to determine the existence of a disorder or the need for outside medical evaluation.
3. Mr. Hole has had one parent conference and one parent phone call. In this question, you are to suggest two additional ways Mr. Hole and Justin's parents can work together to support Justin. For all students, but particularly those who move a lot, it is very important for the teacher and the student's caregivers to be involved in the student's school life. Since they know the child best, the caregivers may be in a better position to "teach" the student in each transition between schools and communities. Your suggestions must be grounded in principles of learning and teaching. You may have other "reasonable responses" that would be considered exemplary responses by the ETS. These ideas are not written as complete responses to the PLT; rather, this section provides suggested content. You will find sample responses at the end of each of the practice tests in Part IV of this book. You'll want to ask an experienced educator to read *your* response for specific feedback and suggestions. Here are a couple of ideas to help Mr. Hole and Justin's family work together to support his education:

 - Establish a home/school log between teacher and parents. Each day Mr. Hole writes a brief note to Justin and his parents about Justin's accomplishments as well as one difficulty, if there was one. He also asks for ways to help Justin at school and suggests ways to help Justin at home. Justin's parents write back to Mr. Hole, and Justin signs his name at the end of the journal entry to signify that he has read his teacher's and his parents' entries. If Justin would like to contribute to the journal, he can. Note that this log highlights the many positive contributions Justin is making and de-emphasizes his poor choices or difficulties.
 - Mr. Hole and Justin's parents can communicate via e-mail and the Internet using a school Web page that Mr. Hole creates. This page identifies each homework assignment, lists the class rules and expectations, and shows examples of student work. In addition, Mr. Hole could post suggested reading and websites to enrich or remediate the week's lessons. Mr. Hole and Justin's parents could communicate more specifically and privately about Justin's daily or weekly progress via e-mail.