

Tackling ACT Writing, Step by Step

The ACT essay plan below has been modified from our ACT Essay Tips article to fit the new ACT Writing Test. The template includes 3 sections: **planning, writing and revising**. If you practice using this template to write ACT essays, you'll get much faster and (probably) more precise. Here's the [sample prompt](#) we'll be responding to:

Intelligent Machines

Many of the goods and services we depend on daily are now supplied by intelligent, automated machines rather than human beings. Robots build cars and other goods on assembly lines, where once there were human workers. Many of our phone conversations are now conducted not with people but with sophisticated technologies. We can now buy goods at a variety of stores without the help of a human cashier. Automation is generally seen as a sign of progress, but what is lost when we replace humans with machines? Given the accelerating variety and prevalence of intelligent machines, it is worth examining the implications and meaning of their presence in our lives.

Perspective One: What we lose with the replacement of people by machines is some part of our own humanity. Even our mundane daily encounters no longer require from us basic courtesy, respect, and tolerance for other people.

Perspective Two: Machines are good at low-skill, repetitive jobs, and at high-speed, extremely precise jobs. In both cases they work better than humans. This efficiency leads to a more prosperous and progressive world for everyone.

Perspective Three: Intelligent machines challenge our long-standing ideas about what humans are or can be. This is good because it pushes both humans and machines toward new, unimagined possibilities.

Write a unified, coherent essay about the increasing presence of intelligent machines.

Stage 1: Planning (Time: 8-10 minutes) It may feel like you won't have time to plan your essay before you write, but really, it's something you can't omit. Trust us. Organizing your thoughts as you write will cost you way more time than if you take the time to plan out your essay before you begin writing

Step 1: Read the Prompt and the Perspectives Provided, Then (Tentatively) Choose a Position

Because addressing the relationship between your perspective and at least one of the other three perspectives is an integral part of the essay task, you need to make sure you understand what each prompt is saying. The good news is that each perspective includes both a general assertion about intelligent machines as well as an opinion that places the topic in a broader context, saving you some work in coming up with your own, independent perspective.

While it is possible to come up with a fourth point of view on the topic, I don't recommend it, as the added time you'll have to spend coming up with your own point of view could be better spent developing your comparison of your perspective to at least one of the other perspectives. If your perspective is a "blending" of multiple perspectives, that's also fine, as long as you make sure you compare your blended perspective to each of the perspectives it combines; otherwise, you won't fulfill the "analyze the relationship between your perspective and at least one other perspective" part of the task. **Bottom line: choose the perspective you think you can support the best.**

** For this sample ACT essay, I'm going to tentatively choose to argue Perspective Three (that intelligent machines challenge long-standing ideas about humanity, which in turn pushes humans and machines toward new, previously unimaginable possibilities), simply because that happens to be the position I think I'll be able to support the best.

Step 2: Quickly Brainstorm Evidence and Explanations to Support Each Perspective Because the ACT essay involves discussing the relationship between your perspective and at least one of the other perspectives given, not just the one you agree with, you'll have to use multiple pieces of evidence in your essay. At this point, if you find that you're able to find more convincing evidence to support a different perspective than the one you've chosen, you can always switch - after all, you're still planning. Also, you don't have to write in complete sentences, or phrase things as elegantly as you will in the actual essay, so don't worry about that.

Sources for evidence

Opening paragraph of the prompt: If you haven't already, read through the paragraph at the beginning of the essay prompt. You can appropriate some or all of the examples in it to use in your own essay.

Personal Experience: you can tell any story (real or not) about you or someone else you know (or make up) that supports any one of your points.

Statistics: again, these can be real or made up. You could invent a research study that looked at recordings of phone calls and found >80% of people end up cursing while using automated phone menus (to support

perspective one), make up statistics that show automated cashiers are able to process 3x as many check-outs as human cashiers (to support perspective 2), or come up with any other kind of statistics that support one of the perspectives.

Specifics from Sources: use knowledge of events from history or current events to support your points. If you're not certain of the details, it's all right - the essay graders won't deduct points for factually inaccurate information. For this essay, you could use the invention of the printing press (and its effects) as an example of how mechanization can lead to "unimagined possibilities."

Here's the evidence I came up with for my essay:

Perspective One: What we lose with the replacement of people by machines is some part of our own humanity. Even our mundane daily encounters no longer require from us basic courtesy, respect, and tolerance for other people.

Evidence: Many of our phone conversations are conducted not with people, but with sophisticated technologies...that don't necessarily work at 100%

Explanation: People get so frustrated with the technology that when they press "0" to speak with a real human they are often rude and discourteous

Perspective Two: Machines are good at low-skill, repetitive jobs, and at high-speed, extremely precise jobs. In both cases they work better than humans. This efficiency leads to a more prosperous and progressive world for everyone.

Evidence: Robots build cars on assembly lines

Explanation: Lower cost, decreases risk of injury to human workers

Perspective Three: Intelligent machines challenge our long-standing ideas about what humans are or can be. This is good because it pushes both humans and machines toward new, unimagined possibilities.

Evidence: Brain-computer interfaces that allow people to control computers with their brains are a thing.

Explanation: Allow people to have and maintain a higher quality of life.

Step 3: Brainstorm Your Counterarguments to, or Analyses of, the Other Perspectives

There's no one right way to respond to the perspectives the ACT gives you. Some of it depends on what point of view you take. For instance, if I agreed with Perspective One, which takes a negative view of the effects of intelligent machines, I might want to discuss both of the other two perspectives (which both take positive views of intelligent machines) in one paragraph, and then disagree with them in the next paragraph as I present my support for Perspective One.

Since I am arguing for Perspective Three (machines challenge our ideas about what humans are or can be, which pushes us and machines toward new possibilities), I am going to argue **against** Perspective One and Perspective Two separately, because I have strong evidence for my analyses of each perspective. Because the essay only requires you to analyze the relationship between your perspective and *at least one* other perspective, if I had lots of evidence to use in my comparison of my perspective and Perspective One, but nothing to say about Perspective Two, I could also decide not to discuss that perspective at all. In this case, I was able to think of solid arguments for and against both of the other perspectives, so I chose to analyze both of them and their relationship to my perspective below. Again, these are not necessarily worded in their final form.

Here's what I came up with for my essay:

Perspective One: What we lose with the replacement of people by machines is some part of our own humanity. Even our mundane daily encounters no longer require from us basic courtesy, respect, and tolerance for other people.

Evidence: Many of our phone conversations are conducted not with people, but with sophisticated technologies...that don't necessarily work at 100%.

Explanation: People get so frustrated with the technology that when they press "0" to speak with a real human they are often rude and discourteous

Counter Argument/analysis: The benefits outweigh the costs, because providing people with the option to submit prescriptions or ask about store hours through an automated menu frees up customer service reps to answer real questions. In addition, recordings of calls with angry customers are used to improve the menus.

Perspective Two: Machines are good at low-skill, repetitive jobs, and at high-speed, extremely precise jobs. In both cases they work better than humans. This efficiency leads to a more prosperous and progressive world for everyone.

Evidence: Robots build cars on assembly lines

Explanation: Robots take over dangerous jobs which decreases risk of injury to human workers, lowering cost to employers

Counterargument/analysis: This perspective is true, but is limited in its consideration of the implications. Robots can not only do things instead of humans, but can actually work with humans, as in precise surgery, to a better result than either humans or machines alone.

Step 4: Organize Your Essay

Now that you have the main points of your essay, it's time to organize them in a way that makes sense. Make sure to include your introduction (with your thesis statement containing your point of view, or at least a rough sense of your thesis statement) and conclusion in this organization. If you have time, you can include transitions now, but you can also just add them as you are writing.

Introduction

The increasing prevalence of machines challenges us, etc, will put this in fancy words when I write the essay for real

Body Paragraph 1

- Perspective One argues that replacing humans with machines leads us to lose part of our own humanity, because even our mundane daily encounters no longer require from us basic courtesy, respect, and tolerance for other people.

- I have witnessed this in my own life through watching my mother interact with some of those "sophisticated" automated phone systems. She sometimes gets so frustrated with the technology refusing to do what she wants that, by the time the menu allows her to speak to a real human, my mother is no longer courteous or respectful.

- Despite this frustration, I think the benefits outweigh the costs, because providing people with the option to submit prescriptions or ask about store hours through an automated menu frees up customer service reps to answer real questions. In addition, recordings of calls with angry customers are used to improve the menus.

Body Paragraph 2

- In contrast to Perspective One, Perspective Two argues that the main utility of machines is in their ability to perform repetitive tasks more precisely and efficiently than humans.
- In auto plants around the world, robots build cars on assembly lines, performing their jobs with high precision and at lower overall cost to employers, who can make a one time purchase rather than having to pay a human a yearly salary (and worry about liability issues)
- This perspective is fine as far as it goes, but is limited in its consideration of the implications. Robots can not only do things instead of humans, but can actually work with humans, as in precise surgery, to a better result than either humans or machines alone.

Body Paragraph 3

- The true impact of intelligent machines in our lives is that they challenge us to re-think our preconceived notions of what people can do or become in the future.
- An example of this is brain-computer interfaces that allow people to control computers with their brains.
- With BCIs, people can overcome physical limitations.. In addition, BCIs have capture the interest of people from all different backgrounds and are being applied to non-scientific fields to create new, previously unimagined inventions and ways to interact with the world.

Conclusion sentence

In conclusion, rather than taking away from our humanity, intelligent machines help us to move forward as a species to new heights.

Stage 2: Writing (Time: 25-28 minutes) Once you've structured your argument, it's time to write it all down!

Step 5: Introduction Paragraph & Thesis

Write your introduction. If you can think of an interesting first sentence that brings your thesis into a larger discussion, start with that. *(If writing the introduction stumps you, just leave 10-15 lines blank at the beginning of the paper and come back to it.)*

From the simplest system of pulleys and ropes in ancient Greece to the most complex supercomputer in the world today, machines have had (and continue to have) a profound influence on the development of humanity.

Make sure you clearly state your thesis. For a 3+/6 essay, this should include your perspective on the issue and how it relates to at least one of the other perspectives presented in the prompt.

While some argue that machines have a negative impact on us, the increasing prevalence of intelligent machines in the world challenges us to change long held beliefs about our limitations and to continue forward to new and even more advanced possibilities.

Step 6: Body Paragraphs

When you start your **first body paragraph**, try to think of a first sentence that refers back to the first paragraph. Ideally, you'll start every paragraph by referring back to your thesis to create a unified argument.

One common argument against the increased presence of machines in our day-to-day lives (seen in Perspective One) is that machines leach away at our basic humanity.

Then address the argument opposing yours (in this case, Perspective One). Explain the evidence that supports this perspective in 3-5 sentences.

I found this to be true in my own life as a result of witnessing many a phone conversation between my mother and an automated telephone menu. For whatever reason, she consistently has issues with the menus that try to verify her date of birth. The automated system never understands what she says (possibly because of her accent), and asks her to input the numbers via her keypad; of course, my mom's smartphone is so smart that the screen turns off while she is on a call, making it impossible for her to follow the automated phone system's instructions. By the time the system gives up and routes her to speak to a "human representative," my mother is often so frustrated that she is far from courteous and respectful to that person.

Then, make sure to explain your counterargument to this perspective, tying it back to your thesis.

Despite my mother's understandable frustration with automated phone systems, however, overall the benefits outweigh the costs. Providing people with the option to submit prescriptions or ask about store hours through an automated menu frees up customer service representatives to answer questions machines are incapable of addressing. In addition, the recordings of angry phone calls (where customers are not courteous, respectful, or tolerant of other humans) are used to improve the phone menus to make them more user-friendly. Thus, the momentary disrespect toward other humans caused by machines is more than compensated for by the positive effects of those same machines.

Body Paragraph 2

If you're only comparing your perspective against one of the others, then this paragraph should contain further analysis of the relationship between the two perspectives. If you're comparing your perspective against both of the other perspectives (as I did in this essay, then this is where you introduce your thoughts on the second perspective.

Another school of thought, exemplified by Perspective Two, argues that the main utility of machines is their ability to perform repetitive tasks more precisely and more efficiently than humans, which leads to a more prosperous and progressive world for everyone.

Address the argument of this second perspective (in this case, Perspective Two). Explain the evidence that supports this perspective in 3-5 sentences.

In auto plants around the world, robots build cars on assembly lines. Instead of having to pay a human employee a yearly salary, invest time in training that employee, and worry about liability should that employee be injured, manufacturing plants can now make a one-time purchase of an intelligent machine that will perform that same job at higher levels of precision. This leads to a more prosperous world for the manufacturers, as they are able to invest less money to get a better product.

Then, make sure to explain how this perspective relates back to your perspective.

This perspective is fine as far as it goes, but is limited in its consideration of the implications. Robots can not only work in place of humans, but can also work cooperatively with humans to a greater results than either could have hoped for alone. This can be seen in highly complex and delicate surgeries, where a surgeon controls robotic microtools to perform operations that even ten years ago would have been unimaginable and impossible.

Body Paragraph 3

Introduce your main perspective, linking it back to the counter arguments you've made against at least one of the other perspectives.

I agree with Perspective Three that the true impact of intelligent machines in our lives is that they challenge us to re-think our preconceived notions of what people can do or become in the future.

Present one final example in support of your perspective.

A final example of this is brain-computer interfaces, or BCIs. Humans are able to manipulate computers with their brains via electrodes that are either implanted in their brains or attached (temporarily) to their heads. With these intelligent machines, formerly paralyzed people who had no hope of communicating with others are able to transcend their physical limitations by concentrating to form words out of keyboards on the computer screens. In addition, BCIs have captured the interest of people from all different backgrounds and are being applied to

non-scientific fields like music to create new, previously unimagined instruments that react to people's thoughts, adding a new dimension to an ancient art form. Truly, intelligent machines are providing the impetus not just for greater efficiency, but for greater accomplishments.

Step 7: Conclusion

Check your time. Try to have 5-6 minutes left at this point.

Come up with a quick sentence that restates your thesis to wrap up the essay.

In conclusion, rather than taking away from our humanity, intelligent machines actually help us to move forward as a species to achieve new, previously unimagined possibilities.

****** No matter your level, you'll find useful advice here - this strategy guide has been read by over 500,000 people :)

Stage 3: Revising (Time: 2-4 minutes)

Step 8: Reread & Revise

Let's look at our complete ACT essay example:

[1] From the simplest system of pulleys and ropes in ancient Greece to the most complex supercomputer in the world today, machines have had (and continue to have) a profound influence on the development of humanity. While some argue that machines have a negative impact on us, the increasing prevalence of intelligent machines in the world challenge us to change long held beliefs about our limitations and to continue forward to new and even more advanced possibilities.

[2] One common argument against the increased presence of machines in our day-to-day lives (seen in Perspective One) is that machines leach away at our basic humanity. I found this to be true in my own life as a result of witnessing many a phone conversation between my mother and an automated telephone menu. For whatever reason, she consistently has issues with the menus that try to verify her date of birth. The automated system never understands what she says (possibly because of her accent), and asks her to input the numbers via her keypad; of course, my mom's smartphone is so smart that the screen turns off while she is on a call, making it impossible for her to follow the automated phone system's instructions. By the time the system gives up and routes her to speak to a "human representative," my mother is often so frustrated that she is far from courteous and respectful to that person. Despite my mother's understandable frustration with automated phone systems, however, overall the benefits outweigh the costs. Providing people with the option to submit prescriptions or ask about store hours through an automated menu frees up customer service representatives to answer questions machines are incapable of addressing. In addition, the recordings of angry phone calls (where customers are not courteous, respectful, or tolerant of other humans) are used to improve the phone menus to make them more user-friendly. Thus, the momentary disrespect toward other humans caused by machines is more than compensated for by the positive effects of those same machines.

[3] Another school of thought, exemplified by Perspective Two, argues that the main utility of machines is their ability to perform repetitive tasks more precisely and more efficiently than humans, which leads to a more prosperous and progressive world for everyone. In auto plants around the world, robots build cars on assembly lines. Instead of having to pay a human employee a yearly salary, invest time in training that employee, and worry about liability should that employee be injured, manufacturing plants can now make a one-time purchase of an intelligent machine that will perform that same job at higher levels of precision. This leads to a more prosperous world for the manufacturers, as they are able to invest less money to get a better product. This perspective is fine as far as it goes, but is limited in its consideration of the implications. Robots can not only work in place of humans, but can also work cooperatively with humans to a greater results than either could have hoped for alone. This can be seen in highly complex and delicate surgeries, where a surgeon controls robotic microtools to perform operations that even ten years ago would have been unimaginable and impossible.

[4] I agree with Perspective Three that the true impact of intelligent machines in our lives is that they challenge us to re-think our preconceived notions of what people can do or become in the future. A final example of this is brain-computer interfaces, or BCIs. Humans are able to manipulate computers with their brains via electrodes that are either implanted in their brains or attached (temporarily) to their heads. With these intelligent machines, formerly paralyzed people who had no hope of communicating with others are able to transcend their physical limitations by concentrating to form words out of keyboards on the computer screens. In addition, BCIs have captured the interest of people from all different backgrounds and are being applied to non-scientific fields like music to create new, previously unimagined instruments that react to people's thoughts, adding a new

dimension to an ancient art form. Truly, intelligent machines are providing the impetus not just for greater efficiency, but for greater accomplishments.

[5] In conclusion, rather than taking away from our humanity, intelligent machines actually help us to move forward as a species to achieve new, previously unimagined possibilities.

In these last 2-4 minutes, you want to read over your essay and trying to pick up a point or two by revising. In this time, you can do several things: correct mistakes and replace dull words and phrasing with fancier words.