

## #26) Advanced Comp Exemption Exam: Sample Exam and Student Essays

The purpose of this handout is to help students prepare for the Advanced Composition Exemption Exam. The handout has two parts. Part A models the reading portion of the actual exam: a writing prompt followed by two sources. Part B has two essays written by U of A students in response to the prompt and sources in part A. Both essays were awarded passing grades, exempting the writers from Advanced Comp. The sample essays include marginal comments added by a Quality Writing Center tutor. By reading the student samples with the tutor's comments, perhaps you can gain a better understanding of how to structure and compose a successful exam essay.

### **Handout #26 / Part A**

This part of the handout is modeled after the Advanced Composition Exemption Exam. Read carefully the writing prompt and the two sources that follow. Then, before moving on to Part B, you might take some time to reflect on how you would prepare to write an argumentative essay on violent video games. If you'd like test preparation practice that includes writing an argumentative essay based on sources, see QWC handout #'s 24 & 25. After you've read the sources below and reflected on the approach you would take, move on to Part B where you'll find two passing essays written by U of A students.

### **Exam Prompt**

To begin, read carefully the following edited and excerpted articles on violent video games. The first is a posting from the website of the American Psychological Association (APA). The second is a 2003 *Wired* magazine article by James Paul Gee. Then, write an essay of about 500 words directed to Arkansas legislators. You are to assume that the legislature is considering passing a law to prohibit the sale of violent video games to children under the age of eighteen. Your essay should develop a thoughtful position on the debate. In addition to advancing your own position, the composition should also summarize and synthesize the main arguments of Gee and the APA.

You have 90 minutes to read and write. You may use a print dictionary. You may use the last page of your blue essay book for scratch paper. Please write on every other line of the blue book pages. Remember that your primary purpose is to develop a cogent and persuasive argument. Your essay will be evaluated on the clarity and thoughtfulness of your ideas, the accuracy and effectiveness of your summarization of the authors' main ideas, and the organization and language of your composition.

### **Source #1) Violent Video Games - Psychologists Help Protect Children from Harmful Effects**

#### **(2006 excerpt from the website of the American Psychological Association)**

Fifty years of research on violent television and movies have shown that there are several negative effects of watching such fare. Because video games are a newer medium, there is less research on them than there is on TV and movies. However, studies by psychologists such as Douglas Gentile, PhD, and Craig Anderson, PhD, indicate it is likely that violent video games may have even stronger effects on children's aggression because (1) the games are highly engaging and interactive, (2) the games reward violent behavior, and (3) children repeat these behaviors over and over as they play

(Gentile & Anderson, 2003). Psychologists know that each of these helps learning - active involvement improves learning, rewards increase learning, and repeating something over and over increases learning.

Drs. Anderson and Gentile's research shows that children are spending increasing amounts of time playing video games - 13 hours per week for boys, on average, and 5 hours per week for girls (Anderson, Gentile, & Buckley, under review; Gentile, Lynch, Linder, & Walsh, 2004). A 2001 content analysis by the research organization Children Now shows that a majority of video games include violence, about half of which would result in serious injuries or death in the 'real' world. Children often say their favorite video games are violent. What is the result of all this video game mayhem?

Dr. Anderson and colleagues have shown that playing a lot of violent video games is related to having more aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Anderson & Bush 2001). Furthermore, playing violent games is also related to children being less willing to be caring and helpful towards their peers. Importantly, research has shown that these effects happen just as much for non-aggressive children as they do for children who already have aggressive tendencies (Anderson et al., under review; Gentile et al., 2004).

Parents have an important role to play. Psychologists have found that when parents limit the amount of time as well as the types of games their children play, children are less likely to show aggressive behaviors (Anderson et al., under review; Gentile et al., 2004). Other research suggests that active parental involvement in children's media usage-including discussing the inappropriateness of violent solutions to real life conflicts, reducing time spent on violent media, and generating alternative nonviolent solutions to problems-all can reduce the impact of media violence on children and youth (Anderson et al., 2003).

In 1993, the video game industry began putting ratings on video games (E for 'everyone,' T for 'teen,' and M for 'mature'). Psychologists such as David Walsh, PhD, have conducted research on how useful the ratings are and how easily children can purchase mature-rated video games (e.g., Walsh & Gentile, 2002). This research has caused the industry to improve its ratings systems and policies regarding marketing mature games to children.

Research has shown both the deleterious effects of violent video games on children and the ease with which children can purchase mature-rated games (e.g., FTC, 2003). These combined types of studies have influenced several major retail stores (e.g., Sears, Target, Walmart) to create policies preventing children under 17 from buying mature-rated video games. Researchers are continuing to study how effectively stores enforce such policies.

Some researchers have created school curricula to help teach children to reduce their total amount of screen time and/or the types of programs and games watched/played. Although the research is still limited, these curricula show many positive effects, such as a reduction of aggressive behaviors on school playgrounds (Robinson et al., 2001).

Some cities, states, and countries have considered legislation preventing the sale of mature-rated video games to children (similar to laws preventing the sale of tobacco to children). Also, Dr. Anderson is among the psychologists helping policy-makers to understand the problems that violent video games can pose for children's healthy outcomes. In addition, numerous child advocacy and parent support groups have incorporated video game research findings into their web sites and educational materials. Examples include [National Institute on Media and the Family](#), [Children Now](#), [Center for Successful Parenting](#), [Action Coalition for Media Education](#).

## Cited Research

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Walsh, D. A., & Gentile, D. A. (2001). A validity test of movie, television, and videogame ratings. *Pediatrics*, Vol. 107, pp. 1302-1308.

## **Source #2) High Score Education: Games, Not School, Are Teaching Kids to Think**

### **(2003 *Wired* magazine article by James Paul Gee)**

The US spends almost \$50 billion each year on education, so why aren't kids learning? Forty percent of students lack basic reading skills, and their academic performance is dismal compared with that of their foreign counterparts. In response to this crisis, schools are skilling-and-drilling their way "back to basics," moving toward mechanical instruction methods that rely on line-by-line scripting for teachers and endless multiple-choice testing. Consequently, kids aren't learning how to think anymore - they're learning how to memorize. This might be an ideal recipe for the future Babbitts of the world, but it won't produce the kind of agile, analytical minds that will lead the high tech global age. Fortunately, we've got *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* and *Deus X* for that.

After school, kids are devouring new information, concepts, and skills every day, and, like it or not, they're doing it controller in hand, plastered to the TV. The fact is, when kids play videogames they can experience a much more powerful form of learning than when they're in the classroom. Learning isn't about memorizing isolated facts. It's about connecting and manipulating them. Doubt it? Just ask anyone who's beaten *Legend of Zelda* or solved *Morrowind*.

The phenomenon of the videogame as an agent of mental training is largely unstudied; more often, games are denigrated for being violent or they're just plain ignored. They shouldn't be. Young gamers today aren't training to be gun-toting carjackers. They're learning how to learn. In *Pikmin*, children manage an army of plantlike aliens and strategize to solve problems. In *Metal Gear Solid 2*, players move stealthily through virtual environments and carry out intricate missions. Even in the notorious *Vice City*, players craft a persona, build a history, and shape a virtual world. In strategy games like *WarCraft III* and *Age of Mythology*, they learn to micromanage an array of elements while simultaneously balancing short- and long-term goals. The secret of a videogame as a teaching machine isn't its immersive 3-D graphics, but its underlying architecture. Each level dances around the outer limits of the player's abilities, seeking at every point to be hard enough to be just doable. In cognitive science, this is referred to as the regime of competence principle, which results in a feeling of simultaneous pleasure and frustration - a sensation as familiar to gamers as sore thumbs. Cognitive scientist Andy diSessa has argued that the best instruction hovers at the boundary of a student's competence. Most schools, however, seek to avoid invoking feelings of both pleasure and frustration, blind to the fact that these emotions can be extremely useful when it comes to teaching kids.

Also, good videogames incorporate the principle of expertise. They tend to encourage players to achieve total mastery of one level, only to challenge and undo that mastery in the next, forcing kids to adapt and evolve. This carefully choreographed dialectic has been identified by learning theorists as the best way to achieve expertise in any field. This doesn't happen much in our routine-driven schools, where "good" students are often just good at "doing school."

How did videogames become such successful models of effective learning? Game coders aren't trained as cognitive scientists. It's a simple case of free-market economics: If a title doesn't teach players how to play it well, it won't sell well. Game companies don't rake in \$6.9 billion a year by dumbing down the material - aficionados condemn short and easy games like *Half Life: Blue Shift* and *Devil May Cry 2*. Designers respond by making harder and more complex games that require mastery of sophisticated worlds and as many as 50 to 100 hours to complete. Schools, meanwhile, respond with more tests, more drills, and more rigidity. They're in the cognitive-science dark ages.

We don't often think about videogames as relevant to education reform, but maybe we should. Game designers don't often think of themselves as learning theorists. Maybe they should. Kids often say it doesn't feel like learning when they're gaming - they're much too focused on playing. If kids were to say that about a science lesson, our country's education problems would be solved.

## Handout #26 / Part B

This part of the handout has two passing essays (exempting the writers from Advanced Comp) composed by U of A students in response to the prompt and sources in Part A. To benefit from reading these essays, you should pay particular attention to each student's thesis and development of argument, summarization and synthesis of the sources, and, finally, organization and structure. A QWC tutor has read each essay and inserted marginal comments, which both compliment things the students have done well and point out things the students might have done even better.

### ADVANCED COMPOSITION EXEMPTION EXAM: SAMPLE ESSAY #1

The video game phenomenon is a fairly recent addition to American society. Thought often to be merely fun and games, the newly developed games being played today are often designed for an adult user and include mature themes and content. The articles "Violent Video Games" and "High Score Judgment" provide insight into the effects gaming has on children. Information from these articles show that legislation should be passed by the Arkansas legislative to prohibit the sale of games with mature content to minors.

"Violent Video Games," from the American Psychological Association, highlights the correlation between playing violent video games and negative behavior in children. Their research shows that video games may have the capacity to affect children because they are involving, rewarding, and repetitive. Aggressiveness and poor social skills are some of the behaviors related to a high use of violent video games. The article addresses potential response to alleviate the negative behavior exhibited. Parental involvement seems to stem the extent to which children are affected. Beyond actions in the home, the gaming industry and certain video game outlets have worked together to rate games for the benefit of parental discretion. Some stores have taken it upon themselves to limit purchases of mature games to adults. The American Psychological Association article provides two main reasons legislation is required to prohibit further deleterious effects on children: The involving nature of violent video games and the poor lack of policies to help parents make informed decisions.

The violence, coupled with the interactive nature of the games, introduces and reinforces negative behavior. The plasticity of children's minds should be protected from potentially dangerous

**Comment [J1]:** Student begins with an overview of the topic under discussion.

**Comment [BH2]:** Good introduction of the sources to be discussed in the student's essay.

**Comment [J3]:** Good thesis statement. The student's main argument is clear and assertive.  
Note: This introduction does not include an essay map. Sample Essay #2 includes an essay map. Essay #2 also uses the introductory paragraph to introduce the reader to the debate over violent games. Here, the student simply mentions that the sources "provide insight."

**Comment [J4]:** Student identifies the first source discussed.

**Comment [J5]:** After using the body of the paragraph to summarize the source's evidence and reasoning, the student uses the paragraph's concluding sentence to identify the thesis of the first source, "Violent Video Games."

influences. The policies in effect to inform parents have been improved, but are still largely voluntary and not uniformly applied. These two reasons together are a hole that legislation can fill to help make children safer and parents more effective in policing their children's activities.

**Comment [J6]:** This sentence needs to refer to the source to make it clear this is the APA's argument, not the student's. Also, this sentence seems like the paragraph's topic sentence, and it should come first.

Another article that deals with how games are affecting youth is "High Score Education," written by James Paul Gee. He addresses the learning and analytical powers that games develop, especially in contrast to the teaching style of typical schools. Gee talks about how games are inherently fun, but also involve mental training. This learning-as-fun style is very effective in conditioning children to become experts at whichever skill they are developing. Gee also says that the pronounced and involving teaching nature of games is no accident. Game makers are moved by the market to develop these types of games because they are the ones most played – and most bought.

**Comment [J7]:** Thoughtful response to the first source. The student takes a position on the main points that he has summarized from the first source. Notice, also, that the student is responding to one of the directives in the prompt—to address the essay to the Arkansas legislature.

**Comment [J8]:** Student signals a transition to discussion of the second source.

Gee's point is that US education styles are ineffective in teaching because they neglect to include the interactivity that games do.

**Comment [J9]:** Student identifies the thesis of the second source, "High Score Education."

Gee is right about how well games can teach children. When talking about positive elements of games, this is seen as a beneficial component of the game playing process. However, as stated before, games are often violent and include material that can have negative effects on children. The efficiency at which newly developed games condition gamers is a serious consideration legislators must address. Policy must reflect the real effects games can have on children.

**Comment [J10]:** This sentence clearly signals that the student is responding to the thesis of the second author.

**Comment [BH11]:** After acknowledging at the beginning of the paragraph that Gee is right about the positive teaching effects of games, the student uses a transitional expression ("however") to signal that he's about to indicate that the negative effects of games outweigh the positive.

**Comment [J12]:** The student's response to Gee's article could use further development regarding Gee's claim that video games are more effective than U.S. teaching styles.

The Arkansas legislature has a responsibility to stay current with modern gaming trends. This includes passing legislation prohibiting the sale of mature games to children, because of the risks children are exposed to from their negative content. When allowing parents to make the decision for their children, the legislature is bolstering the parents' involvement and assuaging future negative gaming effects.

**Comment [J13]:** Student has restated the thesis in a clear, assertive way.

**Comment [J14]:** This essay demonstrates a clear structure—summary of each article, followed by the student's response. This method is referred to as the stacked approach, and it is one way to structure the Argument Synthesis essay.

## ADVANCED COMPOSITION EXEMPTION EXAM: SAMPLE ESSAY #2

Video games have become extremely popular over the past few decades. From playrooms to college dorms to the workplace, gaming is everywhere. The video game industry has seen tremendous growth in the recent years, and the technological advances and current success seems to indicate this trend will continue. This increasing prevalence of gaming, however, has also caused an increase in controversy. Researchers and parents feel some games are too violent and that government intervention is necessary to regulate the sale of these games. Despite these pleas for change, however, the sale of mature video games should not be controlled. The benefits of gaming, the ineffectiveness of proposed legislation, and the overall exaggeration of the effects of mature games all affirm that it is unnecessary to enact regulation.

**Comment [J15]:** Beginning sentences of the introduction provide background on the issue and focus the reader's attention on the controversy surrounding the topic.

**Comment [J16]:** Student takes a clear position on the issue, expressed in this thesis statement.

**Comment [J17]:** Student includes an essay map, which is brief mention of the important subtopics she will cover while developing her synthesis and argument.

**Comment [J18]:** Good topic sentence.

**Comment [J19]:** Student identifies the first source and presents the author's thesis.

Video games are responsible for a multitude of positive effects. The article "High Score Education" references the immense learning that results from video games. The article analyzes the way in which games achieve this learning, commenting on the puzzle solving, strategy, and goal-setting involved in gaming. Gamers usually must master a certain level or ability, and this mastery pushes the gamer to the edge of his competence level. These factors all combine to create a learning experience unparalleled in the classroom. Another benefit of gaming the article did not reference is the increase in hand-eye coordination due to gaming. Research has shown a connection between playing video games and an increase in the coordination. Video games are also tools of social interaction. Friends play games together all the time, developing friendships and social bonds. Games also keep kids entertained and in the house, both of which are important to reducing drug abuse and other crime. Overall, through being an amazing teacher, a relationship builder, and an anti-drug, video games are truly a beneficial and worthwhile experience for children to have.

**Comment [BH20]:** Student uses the foregoing three sentences to summarize the author's evidence and reasoning.

**Comment [J21]:** Student draws on personal knowledge of gaming and adds to the discussion by integrating this information.

Some people, however, feel that regardless of the potential positive effects of gaming, the negative will always outweigh the good. The article, "Violent Video Games" addresses these negative concerns, stating that violent video games, which most games are, lead to an increase in violent thoughts and behaviors. The article says that researchers have recorded an increase in aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors as a result of playing violent games. The article contributes these findings to the interactivity of games, the awarding of violent behavior, and the repetition of these violent actions. Though video games usually do exhibit these three characteristics, they are not necessarily cause for an increase in aggressive thought and behavior. Most children know they are playing a game; they realize their gaming experience is in a fantasy world and does not reflect real life. Because of this understanding, gamers are usually not influenced drastically by violent game play. Though the article "Violent Video Games" presents evidence that violent games do in fact increase violent behavior, this data seems quite hard to empirically test; a host of other variables might result in the change, and controlling for them all seems quite subjective. Also, though games might expose children to violent behavior, they do not do so with as great a degree as movies and television. The news is filled with stories of war and murder, and nearly every movie contains some form of violence. Additionally, these two media are different from games in a very important way: they involve real people, not computer-generated characters. Finally, involving legislation will not prevent children from playing the games they want to. Whether from a parent, sibling, or older friend, they will acquire the game and play it. Making the game illegal might actually make the child want to play it more so he or she can see form himself what all the controversy is about. Ultimately, the responsibility of regulating children's game play lies with the parent, not the government.

**Comment [j22]:** Student has established his structure (according to topics), and the sequence of ideas is easy to follow.

**Comment [j23]:** Good transition

**Comment [j24]:** Student introduces second source and identifies the thesis of "Violent Video Games."

**Comment [j25]:** Good use of qualifying language ("usually not influenced drastically"). Qualifiers indicate that the claim is not absolute but reasonable.

**Comment [j26]:** Interesting assertion—to be more persuasive, the student might have given a couple examples of variables difficult to control.

**Comment [j27]:** This, perhaps, is an example of a variable the student could connect to the preceding assertion (i.e., children are exposed to violence in movies and the news; video games are most likely not the only exposure children have to violence).

My personal experiences with games lead me to believe that their regulation would be a completely futile and unnecessary act. Only a handful of games, such as Grand Theft Auto and Bully, are violent and real enough for regulation to be an issue; in those cases, intervention should be addressed to the game creators and not the game distributors. I truly feel games have increased both

**Comment [j28]:** Since the student has synthesized the main points of the sources, added additional considerations neither source included, and engaged in a thoughtful response to the sources, personal experience adds to the argument. But we must be careful: personal experience as the only support for an argument is seldom enough to persuade an intelligent reader.

my motor and mental capacities, and they have also led to the creation of some of my greatest friendships. These friendships all came while playing a video game, one that was rated “Mature.”

Clearly, enacting legislation to regulate violent gaming would not only be futile but also take away a great learning experience. Parents and researchers must understand that children realize games are not real. They also must realize that television and movies and society in general are far more responsible for creating violent tendencies. Games truly are a great experience for people of all ages.

**Comment [j29]:** Student restates her thesis.

**Comment [j30]:** This essay demonstrates authenticity and intelligence. The student's organization is an integration of the synthesis and his argument. The integrated approach is one way to structure the Argumentative Synthesis.