Commission on Independent Colleges and Universities (cIcu)  
NYSED Higher Education Faculty Development Project

“Implementing the skills of the Academic Literacy Skills Test (ALST) across SEHS curriculum: An Interactive Workshop”

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Welcome to Canisius College's Academic Literacy Skills Test (ALST) Preparation Module. This print version preparation guide is the instructor’s edition to our students’ interactive online training module. It is designed for faculty who will guide students to successfully completing the ALST by embedding the skills of the test into curriculum.
Part One: Introduction

- ALST training module learning outcomes
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- Test timing
- Scoring criteria
- Test taking techniques

Part Two: Competency 0001 – Reading

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- Performance Indicators
- Strategies for Responding to Multiple Choice Items
- New York State Education Department's Study Guide: Sample Test Passages and Questions

Part Three: Competency 0002 - Writing to Sources

- A few comments about the test and instructions
- A few lessons on effective writing
- Performance Expectations
- Performance Indicators
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Part Four: Canisius Students' Comments on Test Performance

First-time test takers share their responses to questions on

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- Navigating the test
- Time needed to complete exam
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- Medications
- Useful websites

Supplemental Section: Materials from Mid-Hudson Region Workshop, “Embedding ALST in Teacher Preparation”

Part One: Introduction:
ALST Training Module Learning Outcomes:

Upon completion of the online preparation guide, teacher candidates will be able to:

- Identify the parts of the exam, as well as the length and testing conditions
- Identify and practice all performance expectations and indicators for both sections of the ALST
- Identify and practice strategies for successful test behavior for this exam

The test writers - Pearson Education, Inc. – identify a series of "performance indicators." Students must demonstrate a level of proficiency in both sections (reading and writing) that is aligned with the test's criteria.

The online module provides students instruction and practice in each of the performance indicators for both the reading and writing sections.

Here lies the overall controversy of testing in the academic world: If this test is a useful measure of candidates' skills, it should offer the opportunity to demonstrate the levels of intellectual capacity required of a highly effective teacher of literacy skills.

For Competency 0001 - Reading: Candidates will be able to:

Identify and practice strategies for successful completion of the selected response items, including, but not limited to:

a. Reading critically by performing all of the performance indicators in the reading passages

b. Successfully predicting the amount of time required to read a typical-sized reading passage

c. Practicing strategies and skills associated with retaining information in a passage
d. Practicing strategies and skills for responding to multiple choice items

For Competency 0002 - Writing to Sources - Candidates will be able to:

Identify and practice strategies for successful completion of the "Writing to Sources" section, including, but not limited to:

a. Writing with success by performing all of the performance indicators in the writing prompts

b. Successfully predicting the amount of time required to read and study the passage associated with the writing task

c. Interpreting the writing prompt in order to write with confidence and purpose

d. Successfully using writing process methods of composition in this testing context that candidates have previously learned: i.e., planning, drafting, revising, editing

The parts of the Academic Literacy Skills Test (ALST)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part One:</th>
<th>Part Two:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competency 0001 - Reading</td>
<td>Also referred to as &quot;Writing to Sources&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This section is worth 60% of the total test score.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Also referred to as &quot;Selected Response Items&quot;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>This section is worth 40% of the total test score.</td>
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The timing of the test

Students have 210 minutes (3.5 hours) to complete the two parts of the test.
The following estimates were used to determine the total test time:

**Competency 0001:** (reading/multiple choice) is designed with the expectation of response time up to 110 minutes (1 hour, 50 minutes).

**Competency 0002:** Each focused constructed-response item (two 100-200 word essays) is designed with the expectation of a response up to 20 minutes (total 40 minutes).

These estimates can be found on the NYSTCE website http://www.nystce.nesinc.com/PDFs/NY202_OBJ_DRAFT.pdf

The extended writing assignment is designed with the expectation of a response up to 60 minutes.

**Note:** Candidates are free to set their own pace during the test administration and move back and forth between the two parts. They may choose to complete the essay writing first and then complete the reading section, or they may complete a portion of the essay section, then proceed to the reading and then return to the remaining essay writing.

Refer to Part Four: "Canisius Students' Comments on Test Performance" for more on the general testing experience.

**Scoring Criteria**

Rubrics for the Focused-Response (two 100-200 word essays) and the Extended-Response sections (one 400-600 word essay) are provided in the Supplement Section of this guide.

You may also visit the NYSTCE website. This site provides the criteria by which the essay writing is scored. The phrase "performance characteristics" is used. Students should study these carefully.

See the "Score Scale" below, used for the Extended-Response Essay - study this 4-point rubric carefully.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score Point</th>
<th>Score Point Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The “4” response demonstrates a strong command of argumentative writing skills.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The “3” response demonstrates satisfactory command of argumentative writing skills.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The “2” response demonstrates limited argumentative writing skills.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The “1” response demonstrates a lack of argumentative writing skills.</td>
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<tr>
<td>U</td>
<td>The response is unscoreable because it is unrelated to the assigned topic or off-task, unreadable, written in a language other than English, or contains an insufficient amount of original work to score.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>No response.</td>
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</table>

**Test Taking Techniques**

"By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail."

Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790)
The overriding philosophy in preparing for this exam (and any other standardized tests) is this:

**DO NOT LET THE EXAM CONTROL YOU; YOU CONTROL THE EXAM.**

Students will control their performance for positive results when they have a clear understanding of (1) the test's purpose and design, (2) the timing of the test, and (3) the skills being tested.

This is especially important for candidates who tend to be overwhelmed by the testing environment and the high stakes reality of the outcome.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The less effective approach:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;If I fail, I cannot be certified.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I never do well on tests. They make me too nervous.&quot;</td>
</tr>
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</table>

ENCOURAGE YOUR STUDENTS NOT TO THINK IN THESE TERMS! By completing the training module, students are taking the control away from the test - THEY ARE CONTROLLING IT!

What do students need to bring to the test?

1. At least one form of government-issued ID that shows the student’s name (as it appears on registration materials)
2. A photograph with student’s signature (e.g. driver's license or passport).

Although students’ information will be in the computer system, they might want to bring a printed copy of their admission ticket as well.

Can students take any breaks?

Yes. When students want to take a break, they must raise their hand; a proctor will come to them. Just know the time spent on break is a part of the testing time (the clock doesn't stop!).

For more test taking strategies, go to http://www.studygs.net/tstprp8.htm

**Part Two: Competency 0001 - Reading (Selected Response Items)**

There are approximately 40 multiple-choice items in this section. Students will read a passage and respond to 5 - 8 multiple-choice items. Each item requires the analysis of complex literary or informational texts.

The reading passages vary in length. This guide offers samples from the Pearson test writers that will help students gauge their time.

**Performance Expectations for Competency 0001 - Reading**

Students should study carefully the language used to articulate these expectations (i.e., "correctly determines", "recognizes accurate summaries of key supporting details", "analyzes", "accurately interprets words and phrases"), as indicated in this image from the website below.
Here is some further commentary and information about each key term found in the Performance Expectations:

**Note:** Further practice with these terms is provided below in "Performance Indicators."

1. **Informational text**

   **General definition:** Text that provides factual information without a personal point of view.

   **ALST Contextual Explanation:** Students will read passages written in either the third person point of view - expository prose that simply provides information without conveying attitude or opinion - or in the first person point of view ("I") (see #2 below). When they read for information, the purpose is to focus on the content only, without needing to consider point of view or the author's attitude.

2. **Narrative text**

   **General definition:** Text presented in the first person voice, ("I would like to discuss... "); uses the first person "I" point of view.
ALST Context: When students begin reading a passage, they should determine the author's point of view - first person? Third person? In addition to delivering information, the narrative style uses the first-person ("I") point of view to present the author's perspective or opinion on the topic.

3. What a text says "explicitly"

General definition: The literal understanding of text - without analysis or interpretation - exactly what the words mean. Also known as denotative interpretation.

ALST Context: Test-writers use passages that challenge candidates to report back the literal level of the text's meaning. Some multiple-choice items will challenge students to demonstrate their understanding of factual interpretation only.

More on determining explicit meaning here.

4. Logical inferences

General Definition: A reasonable conclusion a reader arrives at based on supportive evidence within the text.

ALST Context: Many of the multiple-choice items will require students to demonstrate their ability to make logical inferences. This is a high-order level of reasoning, and is often very challenging. To arrive at logical inferences, it is important to view the reading passages in a broad context, not just at the literal level. Logical inferences are the reader's way of arriving at a sophisticated understanding of the author's prose.

5. Theme

General definition: The central idea of a passage; thesis

ALST context: Each passage will have a theme or central idea. Usually, but not always, a passage's theme is alluded to in the first few sentences, and most often, in the last few. At the end of a passage, it is the reader's job to ask "So what?" or "What is the overall significance of this passage?"

6. Supporting details

General definition: Specific information that demonstrates and supports the author's general ideas/statements.

ALST context: Supporting details are found in the body of each reading passage. Students should recall their previous English classes and lessons on paragraph structure: topic sentence followed by supporting details. Many multiple-choice items will challenge them to recall and analyze details an author used to support his/her theme.
7. Author's point of view

General definition: In narrative text, the attitude/purpose presented by the author in his/her use of language. The point of view of a passage may be the omniscient (third-person informational text) or it may be in the narrative - "I" - point of view.

ALST context: Narrative text (#2 above) is synonymous with the first person "I" point of view. Passages written in the first person voice often require readers to understand what implicit messages/understanding the author wishes to convey.

8. Denotative meaning

General definition: Dictionary meaning, objective, no opinion; tells what something is.

ALST context: Students will find several questions that require them to recall accurate information (same idea with recalling supportive details). The denotative meaning (dictionary meaning) requires a strong command of vocabulary. Some authors may repeat certain words in a passage that are key to the overall understanding.

9. Connotative meaning

General definition: subjective meaning of a word or phrase based on the reader's general knowledge base.

ALST context: The connotative meaning requires a higher order level of reading, much like college-level prose. Multiple-choice items will challenge students to analyze what they have read in order to arrive at accurate interpretations.

"Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret of style." - Matthew Arnold

10. Textual Style

General definition: 4 kinds - expository, descriptive, persuasive, narrative

ALST context: Think of the passage's style as an avenue or tool for arriving at the correct answers to the multiple-choice items. Style has everything to do with how the author "built" the passage. How are the ideas presented? Encourage students to think like an architect as she examines a building.

11. Tone in language

General definition: Variety in sentence structure, phrasing, vocabulary, verb tense, and voice - authors use tone to their advantage in crafting a thought, description, or action.
Different language choices create a range of styles and tones for any given expression to provide its unique meaning. In most cases, the way a reading is presented in words (tone) is at least as significant as its content.

ALST context: Some passages may have a tone that is very factual; others may serve to entertain; some may be examples of sarcasm - a reader's job is to determine how the tone adds to the overall meaning.

**Performance Indicators of Competency 0002 - Reading**

There are 12 performance indicators students must demonstrate in the reading section. These performance indicators are the criteria for evaluating the test taker's reading skills.

1. Determine what a text says explicitly.
2. Make logical inferences based on textual evidence.
3. Determine the central ideas or themes of a text.
4. Draw conclusions based on textual evidence.
5. Analyze the development of central ideas or themes of a text.
6. Recognize accurate summaries of key supporting details and ideas in a text.
7. Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.
8. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings.

9. Analyze how specific word choices shape meaning and tone in a text.

10. Analyze how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of a text relate to each other and the whole.

11. Determine an author's attitude, opinion, or point of view.

12. Assess how point of view and purpose shape the content and style of a text.

Taken from: http://www.nystce.nesinc.com/PDFs/NY202_OBJ_DRAFT.pdf

Consider the performance expectations as students work through each of these 12 performance indicators (hereafter, "PI").

To study the performance indicators, have students read with care the following passage from the beginning of Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence (hereafter, "Independence passage"). Choose another passage if you prefer. Keep track here of how many minutes are required to read this passage carefully.

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are
sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.

Performance Indicator 1: Determine what a text says explicitly:

To arrive at an explicit understanding of a reading passage is to be able to state in one's own language exactly what the passage states.

Have students examine the first paragraph of the "Independence" passage, which is one long sentence! Have them consider their paraphrasing skills - putting an author's words into their own to better comprehend meaning. During the exam, students won't have time to write literal paraphrases, but they can be well prepared to determine the explicit meaning of text by examining the process of paraphrasing here.

See https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/563/0 for more information:

A breakdown of this long sentence:

Original text: When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with one another,...

Reader's paraphrase: "Political" arrangements (forms of government) are not necessarily permanent. It is important sometimes to abolish them and set up new arrangements. When this is true, one group of people has to separate themselves from the group that they had formally joined.

Comment: This paraphrase demonstrates an explicit understanding of the original text. It reiterates what the text says, without leaving anything out.

Look at the second part of this sentence:

Original text: ...and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitles them,...

Paraphrase: No government should dominate any other government, but all should have the same status (be "separate and equal"). The act of a people declaring themselves independent of other peoples (with whom they were formally connected) is a perfectly natural act based on "the laws of nature." Therefore, the thirteen states are "entitled" by natural law to revolt and declare themselves "separate (from) and equal" to all other countries of the world.
And now the third...

**Original text:** ... a decent respect to the opinion of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation...

**Paraphrase:** But when a people decide to break away from another people and establish their own nation, they should - out of respect for the views of other peoples in the world - lay out the reason that have led them to make their revolutionary decision.

**Performance Indicator 2: Make logical inferences based on textual evidence**

As we learned previously, a logical inference is a reasonable conclusion based on an author's presentation of ideas. To infer is to draw conclusions from premises.

Consider this line from the "Independence" passage:

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*

From this sentence, readers can infer - or draw logical inferences such as the following:

*Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are rights that aid mankind.*

*Men (and women) benefit from these rights.*

When we need to make logical inferences based on an entire reading passage, we must keep the **contextual meaning** in mind. Ask students what logical inferences they can make, based on the whole, not just one sentence.
*Remember:* When we need to make logical inferences based on an entire reading passage, we must keep the *contextual meaning* in mind. Challenge students to consider what logical inferences they can make, based on the whole, not just one sentence.

**Performance Indicator 3: Draw conclusions based on textual evidence**

Sometimes passages will contain overt language to demonstrate conclusions. Most times, however, it is up to the reader to arrive at concluding ideas. The evidence, or supporting details, is often used to arrive at such conclusions.

Have students take another look at the "Independence" passage, keeping in mind that it is only an excerpt. It is clear this passage focuses on government, and people's response to government.

**Performance Indicator 4: Determine the central ideas or themes of a text**

This is similar to determining conclusions. In this case, though, the central idea or theme is the author's overall message or significant meaning.

In the "Independence" passage, the central idea or theme is that people should have the right to establish governing bodies and change them when needed.

A reader can also arrive at this central idea: Government is important to a healthy existence and must be monitored at all times.

**Performance Indicator 5: Analyze the development of central ideas or themes of a text**
This requires more than just identifying central idea/theme - the reader must understand its significance, and its specific and detailed definition.

Have students consider an *analysis* of this central idea/theme from "Independence": *People should have a right to establish governing bodies and adjust them when needed.*

The analysis of this statement takes into account the whole passage and looks at its significance -

For example, *Often times, developing effective governments is complicated work, leading to potential division and disagreement among people.*

This analysis is reflective of the author's intention (Jefferson's desire for a peaceful and orderly existence).

**Performance Indicator 6: Recognize accurate summaries of key supporting details and ideas in a text**

Some passages - but not all - will begin with an explicit statement of the central idea and then will proceed with supporting details.

The multiple-choice items will challenge students to identify the summarizing key details and ideas.

Consider the last sentence in the "Independence" passage:

*But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.*

This sentence summarizes the details in the paragraph that refer to man's need to make changes to government when necessary. It puts the details and supporting ideas from that paragraph into one final sentence - a summary.
Performance Indicator 7: Analyzes how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text

In the case of this passage, we have man as the individual, and the formation and existence of a government as the event. Coupled with that is Jefferson's ideas about man's need to govern.

An effective reader will follow these three aspects of the passage and consider their development - how they grow, how the author adds detail, or moves away from them.

Remember, the passages in this section are typically 4-5 paragraphs in length.

Performance Indicator 8: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings

Consider this sentence and the underlined words and phrases here from the "Independence" passage:

Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.

These underlined words and phrases should be interpreted with an understanding that language changes over time. Readers need to be aware of this language change, given the date this was written (1776). Understanding the figurative and contextual meaning of "prudence", for example, is important, as Jefferson is referring to careful thought of
changes in government.

This is a similar, but not exact use of the denotative meaning of prudence: the ability to govern and discipline oneself by the use of reason...skill and good judgment in the use of resources found at this site.

Another example: "Light and transient causes" - not "inconsequential" or "less significant" causes - these two being phrases typical of our current use of English.

The connotative meaning of "right" in "than to right themselves" is "to correct" or to "make better." This is another example, as well, of how language alters through time - (more than 2 centuries ago).

The lesson here is that when students are reading the passages on the exam, they need to read with care. Encourage them to consider how language is used as they are interpreting the central ideas of the piece.

Performance Indicator 9: Analyze how specific word choices shape meaning and tone in a text

Again, the meanings of words change with time. Look at how quickly we see this today in the 21st century - Those jeans are "sweet", "divine", "smokin'".

Recall from Part Two that tone is the author's way of using language to create an attitude or a mood.

In "Independence", Thomas Jefferson's tone is immediate, serious, concerned - how do we pick this up? Consider some of these words he uses:

"causes which impel them"

"deriving their just powers"
"That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it..."

This vocabulary is very strong - the words are very direct and create a tone of stern determination. As students read, they develop the engagement of being equally serious about the topic.

**Performance Indicator 10: Analyze how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of a text relate to each other and the whole.**

The passages on the exam will most often consist of multiple paragraphs (maybe 3, 4, 5, or more). As students read, it is important to examine where the author is moving his/her discussion -

What is s/he driving at? This will lead to a stronger understanding of the central idea (theme) and purpose.

From "Independence", consider the movement from the first paragraph to the second. In the first, Jefferson introduces the idea of man needing to be prepared to make adjustments or change, a system of government that may not be effective. From there, he moves into a discussion of man's rights, liberty, etc., and how they can and should be used for the betterment of a structured government. Thus, his logical argument is that man has the ability to make change, and then, that it is man's right and responsibility to create an orderly system of government.

Have students look at one snapshot of the original text of the Declaration here: Notice that it does not resemble modern interpretations that have paragraph breaks. These breaks and structure were created later to make the piece more readable to the "modern" reader, but the logical movement/development remains the same.

Examine this site: writingcenter.waldenu.edu/1082.htm

**Performance Indicator 11: Determine an author's attitude, opinion, or point of view**

Similar to tone, an author's attitude, opinion or point of view is very important to the theme/central idea. As students read passages, have them determine the point of view - if it is an "informational text" (see Part Two above), it is written in the third person, omniscient point of view, so there is no individual point of view, attitude or opinion. The reading is meant only to inform through facts.

If the passage has a strong emotional message, the author is using language to convey an attitude, opinion, and point of view. This is usually, but not always, done using the narrative first person voice. Notice, for example, how Thomas Jefferson presents a strong attitude of concern about man's structuring of government without using the first person
voice. He wants the reader to feel his sense of urgency and does so in the voice and style of his statement. The reader is expected to recognize this urgency.

Performance Indicator 12: Assess how point of view and purpose shape the content and style of a text

The author's attitude/point of view shapes the content and style and is a matter of looking at the purpose of the passage. In Jefferson's famous proclamation, he is firm in his resolve that man must take control of determining the best form of government for all people, that it is his right and his duty. We see this theme in his tone - the words and phrases he uses - and point of view. He does not waver in his views.

Strategies for Responding to Multiple Choice Items

The multiple choice section may at first appear to be the most daunting part of the entire exam, simply because of the sheer number of passages that need to be read and questions answered. The truth is, though, the answers are already provided for students; they must only pick out the correct one. Here are a few simple tips that may prove useful for this section of the exam:

1. **Read the passages twice** - once to see what they are about, a second read to pick out the details
   a. Reading the passages twice will ultimately save students time later as they try to determine what the questions are *really* asking (It might be a good
idea to also read the related questions after they read the passage for the first time, so as to familiarize themselves with the details they need to look for as they read the passage again.)

2. **Encourage students to go with their first instinct.** The time they spend second guessing themselves is better used reading the passages a second time.

3. **The most detailed answer is usually – but not always - the correct one.** While two options may both seem to be correct, only one can be "correct." In such cases, the answer that gives the most detail from the passage or provides the most precise explanation, (usually the longest one), is most often the correct one.

   The most important aspect of passing this section of the exam is staying calm and confident. The more relaxed students are, the easier it will be for them to stay focused and choose the right answer.

**New York State Education Department's Study Guide: Sample Test Passages and Questions**

Sample Selected-Response Questions are provided in the Supplemental Section of this guide (Competency 0001 - Reading). These are taken from http://www.nystce.nesinc.com/STUDYGUIDE/NY_SG_SRI_202.htm

Encourage students to complete this sample selected-response section to simulate the testing conditions.

Instruct students to find a place and time where they will not be interrupted. Have them read carefully -remembering what has been discussed in Parts One and Two above - **as though this is the actual exam.** Have them record the time they begin to read and when they complete the reading and are ready to examine the questions. This will give them a sense of their reading speed - very important in preparing for the exam – remind them, **YOU CONTROL THE EXAM, DON'T LET THE EXAM CONTROL YOU!** If, for example, it takes an average of 15 minutes to read the passages in this study guide, this will be an excellent gauge for them to plan their time.

**VERY IMPORTANT:** Students need to study all of the questions. Although they can find a way to ignore the correct answer, it is more effective to examine the question, then the choices, and then the explanation of the correct response. The explanation offers further instruction. Have them study the way in which the **performance expectations** and **performance indicators** they have just studied are played out in the actual exam. Encourage them to spend the time going back to these sections and review definitions in the context of these 8 questions.

Completing this sample section under timed conditions will also provide students with a sense of time: how long it takes to read a passage effectively and answer 8 questions. Remember, it is estimated that this reading section may take up to 110 minutes to
complete (one hour and 50 minutes). There are approximately 40 multiple-choice questions, so using this guide as an accurate sample, we can estimate that the actual test will contain approximately 5 passages with 8 questions each.

Part Three: Competency 0002 – Writing to Sources

"I hate writing but love having written." Dorothy Parker

Examine http://www.nystce.nesinc.com/PDFs/NY202_OBJ_FINAL.pdf for a complete explanation of the Performance Expectations for this section of the test. Just as they did with the reading section, have students study carefully the language used to articulate these expectations (i.e., "integrating knowledge", produce clear, cohesive, coherent writing", organize arguments by logically sequencing claims").

a. A Few Comments About the Test and Test Instructions:

Remember, this writing section is worth 60% of the final score. Students will write three essays: two are 100 - 200 word responses and one is 400 - 600 words. Have them consider the many papers they have written in their course work. Instruct them to look at them on their computer for an approximation of length. Typically, in Microsoft Word, using a 12-point font, the 100-200 word essays will be approximately ¾ of a page (double spaced).

The 400-600 word essay is approximately 2 pages (double spaced, 12 point font).

It is very important for students to have a strong sense of this issue of word length when they take the exam. It will offer them that CONTROL of the test, as described in Part One of this module. This awareness will prevent a significant level of anxiety they may feel.
Additionally, take time here to consider the methods they use when they write, especially under timed, testing conditions. Ask them what has worked in their course work. What do they need to think about here?

This section is just as much a test of their reading comprehension as it is their writing skills since it contains reading passages that are used as the topics for students’ writing. Thus, their reading skills that they used for Part One (Competency 0001 - Reading) are just as important here.

The instructions for writing the essays will likely include this statement, taken from the NYS sample Study Guide:

"Your response should be written for an audience of educated adults. With the exception of appropriately identified quotations and paraphrasing from the sources provided, your writing must be your own. The final version of your response should conform to the conventions of edited American English."

From: http://www.nystce.nesinc.com/STUDYGUIDE/NY_SG_CRI_202.htm

Let's break these instructions down:

1. The test writers are indicating that students’ writing should be appropriate for educated folks: this is what students do in most of their course work essay writing - they write to an academic audience. **Remind them to avoid the use of the first person ("I") voice unless the instructions indicate so - they likely will not. Rather, use the third person, omniscient voice.** (Remember, we can only project what the live exam looks like – we need to remind students to expect the unexpected too.)

2. If students quote directly from the passage provided, "appropriately identify", as stated above, means to either write: "According to the author, "... ... ..." or "In the passage, the author states "......". Instruct students not to do this more than once or twice. It is best to limit direct quotes.

3. "... conventions of American English " means students must use grammatically correct sentence structure. This includes correctly composing complete sentences and using correct punctuation and spelling. It also includes matters of style and organization as described in the performance indicators below.

Further instructions for the essay writing are specific to each essay task.

b. **A Few Lessons on Effective Essay Writing:**

(Some material here taken from www.criticalthinking.org)
1. To learn how to write something worth reading, students must keep two questions in mind: "Do I have a subject or idea worth writing about?" and "Do I have something of significance to say about it?"

The good news here is the test contains the topic students will write about - they will read short prose paragraphs as well as a visual image, such as a graph or table. The test writers provide the essay questions - therefore, students’ focus/thesis/purpose is defined for them.

2. The reflective mind creates an inner dialogue with itself, assessing what it is writing while it is writing:

   a. Have I stated my main point clearly?

   b. Have I explained my main point adequately?

   c. Have I given my readers examples from my own experience that connect important ideas to their experience?

3. When students write to an adult/academic audience, as is the case for this exam, they inevitably write for a purpose, make inferences and think within a point of view. At the same time, their readers have their own point of view. They have their purposes, their questions, their assumptions, and beliefs. The better they are at understanding the perspectives of their readers, the better they can understand how to explain their reasoning. The better they understand someone else's system of thoughts, the better they can understand their own.

4. When students can move back and forth effectively between what they are writing and what they want their writing to accomplish, they bring what they are thinking to bear upon what they are writing, and they bring what they are writing to bear upon what they
are thinking. Read that once more! Students change their writing when they recognize, through their thinking, that improvement is needed - and how it is needed.

5. Creating an effective essay is like building a house. We need a foundation from which everything else is built. The house must have at least one entrance, and it must be apparent to people where that entrance is. The first floor must fit the foundation, and the second floor must match up with the first, with a stairway that enables us to get from the first floor to the second.

Talk out this analogy. Creating an effective essay requires a central idea/thesis. The essay must have a strong introduction that clearly states the purpose of the essay. The structure of the essay must include strong paragraphs with strong transitions that allow the reader to understand the direction of his/her ideas.
Examine http://www.nystce.nesinc.com/PDFs/NY202_OBJ_FINAL.pdf for a complete explanation of the Performance Expectations for this section of the test. Just as they did with the reading section, have students study carefully the language used to articulate these expectations (i.e., “integrating knowledge”, produce clear, cohesive, coherent writing”, organize arguments by logically sequencing claims”).

Performance Indicators

There are 15 performance indicators - or skills - students must demonstrate in the writing section. These skills are assessed to determine the quality of their writing. They are the same skills students have learned and practiced in their years as high school and undergraduate students. Direct students to study each skill below and examine the accompanying websites for further practice and review.

1. Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text.
2. Evaluate the validity of reasoning used to support arguments and specific claims in a text.
3. Evaluate the relevance and sufficiency of evidence used to support arguments and specific claims in a text.
4. Evaluate the credibility, objectivity, and reliability of an author or sources used by an author.
5. Analyze how multiple texts address similar themes or topics to compare the approaches the authors take.
6. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively.
7. Introduce a precise, knowledgeable claim.
8. Use valid reasoning to support the claim.
9. Anticipate and address a possible counterclaim.
10. Choose relevant and sufficient evidence from multiple texts to support the claim and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.
11. Establish and maintain an appropriate style and tone.
12. Use transitional words and phrases and vary syntax to link sections of the text and to clarify relationships between ideas.
13. Produce a conclusion that follows from and supports the claim.
14. Choose precise language for clarity and rhetorical effect.
15. Use correct Standard English grammar, usage, capitalization, punctuation, and spelling.

From: http://www.nystce.nesinc.com/PDFs/NY202_OBJ_DRAFT.pdf

To study these performance indicators, use the following site http://www.nystce.nesinc.com/STUDYGUIDE/NY_SG_CRI_202.htm.

Here is a sample constructed-response (essay) test question. It begins with the reading passages, followed by "Assignment 1", the essay prompt (question) and instructions, and then the sample response.

Read "Assignment 1": "Passage A" and "B" and the "Graphic." Have students take note of the length of time required to read and study. Reading online is good practice - don't be tempted to print the sample.

Next, read and study the sample essay response for "Assignment 1". This is the context used for the explanations of the 15 performance indicators below.

STUDENTS MUST READ THE PASSAGES AND SAMPLE RESPONSE IN ORDER TO BENEFIT FROM THE EXPLANATIONS OF EACH PERFORMANCE INDICATOR BELOW. IF THEY FEEL THEIR PRACTICE WILL BE BETTER SPENT, HAVE THEM CONSIDER WORKING HERE FROM A PRINT VERSION OF THESE PASSAGES/RESPONSE.

Performance Indicator 1: Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text.

General Explanation: To "delineate" means to "describe or portray something precisely" (http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/delineate). In this
case, students need to demonstrate their ability to delineate, describe and portray the argument and claims in the passages from which the essay questions are derived.

**ALST Contextual Explanation:** In "Assignment 1", both passages contain a significant amount of detail to which students must evaluate and respond. They must choose one of the two passages that presents the most compelling argument. Further, they are required to:

a. Outline the specific claims made in each passage ("Should Congress reassess the Renewable Fuel Standard in the Energy Independence and Security Act?").

b. Evaluate the validity, relevance, and sufficiency of evidence used to support each claim.

c. Include examples from both passages to support their evaluation.

Students describe and portray regularly in their course work - they read chapters from texts, articles, literature, reports, etc., and they write about them. They often analyze, compare and contrast, persuade, etc. So, they bring to this part of the test a great deal of experience.

The sample response to "Assignment 1" contains two paragraphs - the first describes why "Passage A" is less sufficient; the second paragraph describes how "Passage B" presents a more sound argument. The essay is a cogent presentation of the writer's views, and is written in the third person, omniscient voice.

**Performance Indicator 2: Evaluate the validity of reasoning used to support arguments and specific claims in a text.**

**General Explanation:** This refers to the reasoning found in the passages – Students need to present clear explanations that describe the reasoning and how it supports specific claims.

**ALST Contextual Explanation:** For example, the sample response to "Assignment 1" provides specific details that support the student's assertion that "Passage B" provides more effective analysis and relevant data than "Passage A". The essay clearly distinguishes between these two passages to demonstrate the central idea that "Passage B" is stronger. Just remember that this criterion requires students to evaluate the validity of the reasoning found in the reading. Instruct students to show confidence in their explanations.

**Performance Indicator 3: Evaluate the relevance and sufficiency of evidence used to support arguments and specific claims in a text.**
General Explanation: Students need to demonstrate their ability to evaluate the relevance the passage writers use to support their argument/specific claims. "Sufficiency" here refers to the passage writers' ability to provide sufficiently useful evidence and to do so with sufficient detail.

ALST Contextual Explanation: In the sample response to "Assignment 1", the student evaluates the sufficiency of evidence very effectively when s/he states "...but does not furnish any information to support these estimates." Likewise, in paragraph two, s/he states, "To support these claims, the author provides analysis and relevant data from authoritative government sources."

Performance Indicator 4: Evaluate the credibility, objectivity, and reliability of an author or sources used by an author.

The Credibility Questions:

- Does he know what he is talking about?
- Can I trust that he will use that information for the best outcome?

If both answers are yes, then the source is credible.

General Explanation: When test takers write to evaluate an author's work that includes outside sources, they need to consider the quality of these sources. The credibility, objectivity and reliability of sources determines the strength of the passages students are evaluating. They must demonstrate their ability to understand these characteristics of good writing.
ALST Contextual Explanation: The exam requires students to evaluate how the authors of the passages use outside sources. In the sample response to "Assignment 1", direct students to such statements as these:

"...Although the author lists other factors that influence corn prices and shows how reduced fuel prices lower production costs for corn growers, this evidence is not sufficient. " (last sentence of paragraph 1)

and...

"...To support these claims, the author provides analysis and relevant data from authoritative government sources." (paragraph 2)

This is the student's demonstration of his/her understanding of the role and importance of outside sources that adds to the strength of good writing.

Performance Indicator 5: Analyze how multiple texts address similar themes or topics to compare the approaches the authors take.

General Explanation: Higher order reading requires the ability to distinguish one source from another on a similar topic. For example, when we go to history books to examine the United State's involvement in the Iraq War, we find a variety of approaches authors use to detail this topic. One approach might be the United States' losses as a result of its
involvement in the war - how different authors approach this concept is something a strong reader and writer is able to determine.

**ALST Contextual Explanation:** Students are challenged to read and study 2 - 3 passages that address the same topic. They need to analyze similar themes/central ideas by comparing the approaches the writers take.

For example, the sample response to "Assignment 1" on ethanol's role is singularly about how each of the two authors demonstrates their claim: in paragraph one, the test writer states: "The author of Passage A contends that increases ethanol production promotes economic growth and makes the US more energy independent." In paragraph two, the student writer describes how a contrary view is shown by another source: "The main argument in "Passage B" is that increased diversion of corn to ethanol production will drive up the price of corn."

*Note: Keep in mind that when students "compare," they do not simply show similarities. Rather, comparing two sources, as in this case, is to examine them in relation to one another - thus they may demonstrate differences as they seek to examine two readings on the same topic.

**Performance Indicator 6: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively.**

**General Explanation:** "Reading" is not limited to language in the form of prose text. We read from various forms: charts, lists, pictures, video clips and more. High order reading demands the ability to take meaning from any form of print - be it a simple paragraph or a pie chart.

**ALST Contextual Explanation:** In the sample, "Assignment 2", student are asked to respond to the information in the pie charts by explaining how it is integrated into the author's central argument. The student writer relates this graphic to "Passage B" in his/her first sentence: "Information presented in the pie charts provides strong support for the argument presented in Passage B."
Instruct students to pay close attention to what the essay questions are asking them to DO: encourage them not to generalize here; they should address exactly what is asked of them.

**Performance Indicator 7: Introduce a precise, knowledgeable claim.**

**General Explanation:** "Claim" here refers to whatever the student's stance is on the question being posed. Seasoned academic writers know all too well that it is important to state clearly the purpose of one's writing. A precise and knowledgeable claim should be a short and clear statement of purpose. Strong writers will not force readers to work through long and needlessly complicated sentences.

**ALST Contextual Explanation:** Look at this opening sentence in the student sample response to Assignment 1: "The author of Passage A contends that increased ethanol production promotes economic growth and makes the US more energy independent." Given the task (to identify which author presents a more compelling argument...), the student opens his/her essay with this topic sentence, going right to the business of responding to the question by starting with Passage A. No nonsense approach.

**Performance Indicator 8: Use valid reasoning to support the claim.**

**General Explanation:** Whatever claim students make must be supported with valid reasoning. They must make sense, and this 'sense' must be based on sound argument.

**ALST Contextual Explanation:** When students examine the sample response to Assignment 1 in its entirety, they will see the reasoning used in the sample. The student-writer leads up to his/her claim that Passage B is sounder by presenting the limitations found in Passage A. This is a reasoned way to make the conclusion that one passage is stronger than the other.

**Performance Indicator 9: Anticipate and address a possible counterargument.**

**General Explanation:** Whenever we write persuasively - presenting a certain view - we need to consider alternative thinking. All sound discussions - oral or written - provide the audience with the overt consideration that there are different points of view on a topic. This doesn't mean we need to present those, but simply acknowledge that such different points of view exist.

**ALST Contextual Explanation:** For example, in the sample response to Assignment 1, the student-writer states: "Although the author lists other factors that influence corn prices and shows how reduced fuel prices lower production costs for corn growers, this evidence is not sufficient." S/he recognizes that another reader might consider that the author's listing of other factors does indeed add to the credibility of the claim. The student brings us back to his/her claim: "not sufficient!"
Performance Indicator 10: Choose relevant and sufficient evidence from multiple texts to support the claim and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.

General Explanation: Very similar to Performance Indicator 3, with the additional responsibility of the student-writer to avoid "plagiarism." In a testing context where students are either without information on full text citations, or unable to use a certain documentation style such as APA or MLA, appropriate use of language to avoid plagiarism includes: "According to the author ... " or "The author states... " or "The passage provides... " This demonstrates students’ willingness to responsibly present factual information that they are using to support a claim.

ALST Contextual Explanation: For example, in the sample response to Assignment 1, the student-writer does not take credit for the evidence s/he uses to support a claim. All of the evidence used in the essay is referred to in the context of what the passage states.

Performance Indicator 11: Establish and maintain an appropriate style and tone.

General Explanation: A writer's style and tone is determined by the purpose of the writing. Informative, academic writing requires a style and tone that serves to present the writer's central idea in clear and concise language and structure. Style and tone serves a different purpose in a cartoon caption - to entertain. Whenever we write to inform, the style and tone should support this purpose.

ALST Contextual Explanation: For example, the sample response to "Assignment 1" demonstrates a "no-nonsense" style and tone. The response's style is characterized as highly structured and orderly; its tone is serious and informative. Take a look at it.

Re-read Performance Expectations 10 and 11 from Part One (Competency 0001 - Reading) for more on style and tone.

Performance Indicator 12: Use transitional words and phrases and vary syntax to link sections of the text and to clarify relationships between ideas.
**General Explanation:** Just as style and tone help create a sound and informative essay, transitions and word choice (syntax) provide the reader with both order and clear use of language as representation for intended meaning. Transitional words/phrases serve to direct the reader - either in terms of where the ideas are leading, or in terms of the relationships between ideas. Such words/phrases that serve to direct the reader include: *next, in addition, further, later, finally, as well.*

Transitions used to solidify relationships between ideas include: *however, therefore, thus, on the other hand, consequently.* This deliberate effort to order ideas and place them in context with one another characterizes strong writing.

**ALST Contextual Explanation:** For example, the sample response to "Assignment 1" requires students to relate one passage to another - they will likely be required to do the same. Transitions are crucial here. The “Assignment 1” passage contains these transitional words/phrases: *but, although* (used in both paragraphs), *also, to support these claims.* Look at these in terms of this instruction.

**Performance Indicator 13:** Produce a conclusion that follows from and supports the claim.

**General Explanation:** Effective essay writing uses the order of stating a claim, providing supporting evidence and re-stating the claim. When students write extended essays (3-5 double-spaced pages or more), they have the opportunity to compose a concluding paragraph just as full-length textbooks typically have a concluding chapter.

When writing shorter pieces (1 or 2 pages, as is the case for this exam), a conclusion of one - or perhaps two - sentences that restates the initial claim is sufficient. It is the
writer's way of putting an exclamation mark on his/her initial claim. By doing so, the audience is reminded of that claim.

**ALST Contextual Explanation:** The sample response to "Assignment 1" provides an excellent example of this: Look at the last sentence of the passage: "Although one might question the author's fears, the argument appears sound." That Passage B is the stronger of the two was the student-writer's claim, or his/her purpose.

**Performance Indicator 14: Choose precise language for clarity and rhetorical effect.**

**General Explanation:** Very similar to Performance Indicator 11. Precise language is necessary for the audience to understand exactly what students intend. Rhetorical effect is the consideration of how ideas are ordered or structured in an essay, and how they relate to one another. The transitions students provide offer clarity for this order and relationship of ideas.

**ALST Contextual Explanation:** Read the ALST contextual explanation for Performance Indicator 11. Again, the sample response to "Assignment 1" demonstrates students’ ability to produce a structured response that follows a reasoned order by using precise language (i.e., The author...contends, He projects..., "...does not furnish...", although the author lists...") This language serves to demonstrate students’ understanding of how to present their claim.

**Performance Indicator 15: Use correct Standard English grammar, usage, capitalization, punctuation and spelling.**

**General Explanation:** As a literate community, we are expected to conform to the uniform standards of American Written English. This final performance indicator is always essential to good writing. Students must not only use standard English grammar, but understand why it is important to do so: all they have to offer their audience is words on a page - that's the mechanism by which we communicate ideas - thus the importance for grammatically correct sentences, appropriate vocabulary, clearly delineated punctuation within and between sentences, use of capitalization to designate proper nouns, and spelling that demonstrates the ability to know language at that level.

**ALST Contextual Explanation:** The sample response to “Assignment 1” is void of any flagrant errors in these areas. Students can only do their very best to write a
grammatically correct essay. If their skills in these areas are weak, they will want to spend more time with proofreading and editing – students must consider this as they plan their time during the test.
Part Four: Canisius Students' Comments On Test Performance

Here are some responses to a series of questions asked of undergraduate students who wrote the ALST in 2014-15. These comments are very insightful.

1. What do you recall about the length of the reading passages that were followed by multiple-choice items?

Student A: The reading passages were about a full page and a half.

Student B: I thought the length of the reading passages was decent; not short, but not overwhelmingly long. The way it's set up is the questions are presented one at a time on one side of the computer screen with the passage it refers to on the other side of the screen...so there are several screens for one passage.

Student C: They would take me about 7-10 minutes to read, and I would have to re-read to answer the questions.

2. Did you take notes or annotate online as you read the reading passages? Was there opportunity?

Student A: I didn't take any notes as I read. I also didn't annotate online. I didn't see a way to do so. I instead referred back to the text when answering the questions.

Student B: They give you a spiral-bound pad of dry-erase paper and a dry-erase marker to take notes as you read; you can't annotate right on the text online (I wish you could!).
Student C: They did provide a board and dry erase marker, however I just used it to plan my written response, not on the MC.

3. Can you describe the kinds of questions in the multiple-choice section?

Student A: Many of the questions required detailed analysis of the reading. Some questions asked for the main idea of that section, some required you to choose the sentence which best described this. Each choice was very specific and required rereading the option and the process of elimination.

Student B: I don't really remember specifics regarding the questions on the multiple-choice section. I do remember questions regarding the main idea of the passage and finding the closest definition of a word used in context of the passage; I'm sure if I saw the questions again I would remember!

Student C: A lot were understanding the context of the sentence in the passage. Unfortunately I don't remember too many specifics with MC.

4. Were you able to move from the first part of the test - reading - to the second part - writing - and then back to the reading? Or were you required to complete the reading section before moving to the writing?

Student A: You can move throughout the test in any order you want and can go back at any time. You can also flag questions that you wish to return to later. I found the flagging of questions extremely helpful and I utilized this throughout the test. That way you can check your work on questions you weren't fully certain on that require a second look.

Student B: You can go in any order that you want. You could start with the writing and then go to the reading, or do some reading, then the writing, and then the rest of the reading...it doesn't matter. There is also a "Flag for Review" feature where you can flag questions you're not sure of so that you know which ones to come back to later, which is nice.

5. Did you need the entire 3.5 hours for the exam? Elaborate.

Student A: I took the entire 3.5 hours. I was typing up my essay response until the last second. This test is very long and requires a lot of analysis and concentration.

Student B: I did need the entire 3.5 hours for the exam; I literally had just enough time! I did take my time though...I remembered doing sample multiple-choice questions at the prep course and how I had extra time to spare, so I made sure not to rush through the multiple choice. There's also a little timer at the top of the page telling you how much time you have left, so I used that to help me budget my time and make sure I left enough.
time for the writing section (I took the test in order; the reading passages and then the writing).

Student C: No, but I would've taken more time had I known this going in. It took about 2 hours for me, but I think if I went in with the mindset that I will have extra time so to be a little more relaxed, a little less stressed for time, and really gone over especially what I wrote more than once it would have been a good thing.

6. What were the most challenging aspects of the writing portion of the exam? Elaborate.

Student A: Meeting the time requirements.

Student B: The most challenging aspect of the writing portion was trying to get all of my thoughts straight to write a coherent, logical essay with a limited amount of time. The first two essays were very brief and didn't take too long; they basically had to deal with analyzing the passages and didn't require you to take a particular stance. The last essay requires more thought since it requires you to take a stance on the issue and argue your position. I read the questions before I read the passages. Then, as I read the passages, I wrote notes on my dry-erase board that I thought would help me answer the questions; that really helped...I looked back at my notes as I wrote the essays. Also, I believe the first question did not need you to use the graphic, so I only read the first two passages so that I could concentrate on just that material...I would recommend not inundating yourself with material from an extra passage/graphic until you have to use it for an essay.

Student C: Making sure I was sticking to answering the question and not getting on a tangent trying to include evidence.

7. What other information can you share with students in their preparation for this test?

Student A: Take your time. Expect the test to take you the whole time. Flag questions you aren't 100% sure of and want to come back to and check later. Focus: pay close attention to detail and look back at the text.

Student B: All I did to prepare for the test was take the prep course at Canisius and then look over the materials provided at the prep course a couple days before the test. It really helps just to be prepared for the structure of the exam and to know what it tests; I knew what to expect after looking over the materials I got from the prep course, which helped to boost my confidence. I also tried to get used to reading material online instead of printing it off; if you're used to reading offline, reading from the screen for 3.5 hours is a bit of an adjustment, and tiring (I still wish it were a paper exam!). Overall, if you're a strong reader and writer, you will do fine on the exam...that's all it's testing.
Student C: The passages were not that difficult, but make sure you take your time with them. Also, go over it as much as you can because it is one of those tests where you leave thinking you did well, but not really knowing either way.

Part Five: Nutritional Suggestions for 24 hours prior to exam

No question about it, food is our source of energy, both physical and intellectual energy. **DO NOT GO INTO THE EXAM ON AN EMPTY STOMACH.** Also, monitor any medications you take – Consult your physician; if you can skip anything that makes you drowsy or distracts you in any way, do so. Here are two excellent sites on the best foods to eat prior to an exam:


Notes