

**Assessment on the basis of essay writing in the admission to the master's degree in
the Republic of Azerbaijan**

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Abstract

The admission examination to the master's degree in the Republic of Azerbaijan is conducted in the centralized way by the State Students Admission Commission. The examination is carried out in two stages. At the first stage the candidates' logical reasoning skills and abilities, also their knowledge of informatics and a foreign language are tested, but at the second stage the candidates' attainments in the speciality are examined. At this stage the attainments of the candidates who apply for the specialities of the directions of Journalism, Philology and Linguistics are assessed on the basis of essay writing. It measures the candidates' abilities to apply their knowledge, their creative, critical and analytical thinking and writing skills.

This paper is devoted to methodical preparation for essay writing and its assessment including criteria for scoring the essays, selection and training of graders prior to the examination, arrangement for and conducting of the assessment process and the analysis of the results of the assessment.

The information on the experience gained in the sphere of the assessment of essays during the last seven years is given coverage of in the paper.

*Key words related to the foci of the paper: **master's degree, essay, admission exam, graders***

The two-level model of higher education has been applied in Azerbaijan since 1997: the bachelor and the master levels.

Admission to bachelor's degree has been conducted by the State Students Admission Commission (SSAC) by centralized testing since 1992.

According to "Regulations about the State Students Admission Commission" approved by the Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan dated April 6th, 2005, SSAC has been conducting centralized admission examinations to master's degree of all higher education institutions of our country since 2005.

Admission is regulated by "Admission Rules for master's degree of higher education institutions of the Republic of Azerbaijan" developed and confirmed by SSAC for every academic year. According to the rules, the persons having graduated the higher vocational training in the bachelor's degree and having the diploma about graduating from higher schools possess the right to be admitted to the master's degree of higher schools.

The bachelors who choose specialities of directions HSM 020000 Philology and HSM 040000 Linguistics, also the bachelors who choose specialities of the direction HSM 050000 Journalism, instead of answering test items on a speciality, write a composition (an essay) on the given theme. The written work is performed in the language corresponding to the speciality chosen by the bachelor (in the language of bachelor's specialization).

The bachelors wishing to be admitted to specializations HSM 040014 Translation, HSM 040013 Simultaneous interpretation, HSM 040008 Theory of translation and interlingual relationship of the direction HSM 040000 Linguistics, instead of answering multiple-choice test items on the speciality, translate the offered text from Azerbaijani or Russian, depending on the training sector, into the language of specialization.

These written works are evaluated on a 5-point marking scale and then converted into a 50-point scale.

Beginning from 2009 entrance examinations to master's level were conducted at two stages. At the first stage the logical thinking of the bachelors, level of their knowledge of a foreign language and informatics (computer science) were examined by testing method, and at the second stage their knowledge on the speciality they graduated from was tested by use of multiple-choice test items or by means of written exam (essay, translation or written answers to questions on a speciality).

Each correct answer of the bachelor is estimated by one point. Wrong answers do not influence the sum of correct answers.

At the first stage 50 test items for logical thinking, 25 on computer science and 25 on a foreign language are offered to bachelors. Bachelors with the total score of not less than 50 are allowed to participate at the second stage of admission examination. Thus, the points scored by the bachelor for test items for logical thinking, should be not less than 20, on computer science not less than 10, on a foreign language not less than 10.

The bachelors who chose specialities of directions HSM 020000 Philology and HSM 040000 Linguistics (except the specialities on the Azerbaijan, Russian and English languages and literature), and the bachelors who chose specialities of the direction HSM 050000 Journalism, instead of test items on the speciality, wrote a composition (an essay) on the given theme. The written work was performed in the language corresponding to the speciality chosen by the bachelor (in the language of specialization).

The bachelors wishing to be admitted to specializations HSM 040014 Translation, HSM 040013 Simultaneous interpretation, HSM 040008 Theory of translation and interlingual relationship of the direction HSM 040000 Linguistics, instead of answering multiple-choice test items on their speciality, translated the offered text from Azerbaijani or Russian, depending on training sector, into the language of specialization.

These written works were estimated on a 50-point marking scale.

At the first stage of examination 2 hours and 30 minutes, and at the second stage - an hour and 30 minutes were allotted for answering exam questions.

Because of the time needed to answer and score essay questions and the limited amount of content that can be covered in them, essay questions should be used only when other types of questions cannot measure accomplishment of the objective(s). They are particularly appropriate when the number of students being tested is small. They can be useful when there is little time to prepare the assessment but more time to grade it.

Essay tests or questions should be aligned with objectives and instruction, as are other types of assessments. Assessment on the basis of essays strives for bachelors' ability to demonstrate the higher-order thinking skills. That is why we pay special attention to give instructions that should prepare candidates for essay questions. Necessary materials and instructions for the bachelors preparing for written exam are prepared and published by the SSAC in order to prepare candidates for essay-writing and translations more effectively.

Essay questions eliminate the possibility of the students' guessing the correct answer. However, essay questions are generally more time-consuming to grade than other types of questions and there are several factors that can influence the grade awarded. To respond to essay questions, students need to have writing skills and may be unfairly penalized because of handwriting, spelling, grammar, neatness, vocabulary, sentence structure, organization, etc. if they are not part of the content being assessed. To prevent this from happening, we suggest that combined grades or scores be given for essay content and writing skills. This involves scoring all essays holistically and analytically..

Scoring should be free from bias, subjectivity and reliability variables. There is a risk that the grading of essay responses can be subjective and unreliable. The concept of

reliability is commonly applied to the results of tests and measurement instruments. When consistent results can be obtained with an assessment, we say that the instrument is reliable. In the case of essay papers, reliability is dependent on the scoring of the question. For the scoring to be reliable, there should be consistency among scorers. Two individuals independently scoring the same set of papers should arrive at the same scores. Unreliability may be shown by the teacher's awarding higher grades to some students when their answers do not justify the better marks. The order in which papers are graded can also have an impact on the grades that are awarded. A teacher may grow more critical (or more lenient) after having read several papers, thus the early papers receive lower (or higher) scores than papers of similar quality that are scored later. Also, if the scorer becomes tired, his or her judgement can be affected. If the student takes a position contrary to that of the scorer, the scorer must be sensitive to possible bias in scoring the essay because the student's position differs from that of the scorer.

The graders or readers, who are university faculty hired by our Commission for this purpose, evaluate the essays on a 0 - 5 scale. Two trained readers/graders assign each essay a score between 0 and 5, where a score of 0 is reserved for essays that are blank, off-topic, not written in a foreign language, or considered illegible after several attempts at reading. 5 is the highest possible score. If the two scores are within one point of each other, they are averaged to produce a final score from 0 to 5. If the two readers' scores differ by more than one point, then a third experienced reader reads the essay and adjudicates the discrepancy. Neither reader is aware of the other's score. The final score for the essay is the average of the first two readers' scores or the average of the adjudicated grade and the grade which is higher and closer to it.

The criteria for each score (0 - 5) have been prepared by SSAC experts taking into consideration the international experience in this sphere. There are four basic criteria for evaluation:

1. *Content* — the strength, relevance, and persuasiveness of the bachelor's ideas, the ability to present arguments through sound reasoning and supporting examples;
2. *Organization* — the bachelor's ability to present his/her ideas in an organized and cohesive manner: how clearly the ideas flow and connect together from one to the next;
3. *Language* — the bachelor's facility with the vocabulary of the foreign language, specifically, word choice and usage and syntax (sentence structure);
4. *Mechanics or Grammar* — the bachelor's facility with the conventions of standard written language, grammar, spelling, punctuation and so forth.

The first two areas are far more important than the last two. However, writing style, grammar and diction — i.e., the bachelor's ability to communicate ideas effectively in writing — may influence readers as well. So the bachelor should strive to demonstrate competency in all four areas. Of course, if he is weak in one area, he can still achieve a high score by demonstrating great strength in other areas.

The testing commission instructs the readers to evaluate essays both holistically and analytically. An essay that demonstrates competency in all four areas will probably earn a higher score than an essay that contains excellent ideas but contains many mistakes in grammar, word usage and mechanics.

The readers who score the essays are mostly experienced higher school teachers and university faculty members who teach adequate courses. Professional journalists working in mass media are also among the graders of journalistic essays.

Prior to the exam, some weeks before scoring essays, readers complete a training course organized by SSAC that familiarizes them with the principles of scoring and teaches them to evaluate essays according to the agreed-upon standards.

Immediately after the test, the bachelors' essays are sent to the central processing location, ciphered there and two copies of each written paper are made. The day after the exam, each of the essays are read and evaluated. Two readers read and score each essay independently and simultaneously, each reader sitting in a different room is given a copy of a written work and no reader is informed of any other reader's score.

Each reader employs the same grading method by which he or she assigns a single score from 0 to 5 (0, 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5) based on the overall quality of the writing in response to the assigned task. All readers employ the same specific evaluation criteria.

Essays can evaluate more complex cognitive or thinking skills assuming that rote memory and recall tasks are assessed more appropriately through multiple choice test items.

Advantages:

- *Require students to demonstrate critical thinking in organizing and producing an answer beyond rote recall and memory*
- *Empower students to demonstrate their knowledge within broad limits beyond the restraint of objective multiple choice tests*
- *Allows learners to demonstrate originality and creativity*
- *Reduces preparation time in developing, as well as distributing, a test, especially for small number of students*
- *Presents more possibilities for diagnosis and selection during admission exams*

Disadvantages:

- *Grading is often subjective and not consistent, coloured by preconceptions of student, neatness and handwriting, spelling and grammar*
- *Can be a limited sampling of content*
- *Good writing requires time to think, organize, write and revise*
- *Time consuming to correct*
- *Advantageous for students with good writing and verbal skills*
- *Essay topics are not always proper to assess higher thinking skills*
- *Advantageous for students who are quick, as opposed to those who take time to develop an argument*

The goals of the creative essay task are to evaluate a candidate's ability to think and write creatively and to assess the breadth of his/her knowledge and education. This kind of question gives students an opportunity to convey their personalities and views.

In order to select the best possible candidates for admission, admission commission is not only carefully evaluating a student's academic history and standardized test scores, but also the student's ability to successfully put his/her ideas into writing. The skills demonstrated through the admission essay are a valid indication of a student's academic strength.

The admission essay accomplishes three goals:

1. to convey a sense of the student's unique character
2. to demonstrate the student's writing skills
3. to demonstrate the student's ability to organize thoughts coherently

What is the basic structure of an essay?

All essays regardless of their intended purpose have three basic components: an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. Let's consider each component separately and in detail.

COMPONENT ONE: INTRODUCTION

A good introduction should include (1.) an attention-getter, such as a startling fact, (2.) your thesis statement indicating the intention of the essay, and (3.) a brief preview of the supporting ideas that will develop the main point of the essay.

COMPONENT TWO: BODY

The body of an essay usually consists of three to five paragraphs (one paragraph for each supporting idea). Each paragraph should begin with a topic sentence which states the main point of that paragraph. The following sentences need to support your main point.

COMPONENT THREE: CONCLUSION

The conclusion summarizes the entire essay and features a brief restatement of the thesis (intention of the essay) and main supporting ideas.

Two evaluators score the essay according to its overall effectiveness. Their evaluation is based on the following features:

Well-focused main points;

Clear organization;

Specific development of the ideas;

Control of sentence structure, punctuation, grammar, word choice and spelling.

Test-takers are asked to write an essay consisting of 2-4 pages on an assigned topic. Each essay must be written within 90 minutes and is scored on a scale of 0 – 5. The readers evaluate the quality of the examinee's ideas and his ability to organize, develop, and express ideas with relevant support. While mastery of the conventions of written language factor into scoring, minor errors are expected.

Each essay is graded on a scale of 0 (the minimum) to 5 (the maximum):

- *0 An essay that is totally illegible or obviously not written on the assigned topic.*
- *1 An essay that is fundamentally deficient.*
- *2 An essay that is seriously flawed.*
- *3 An essay that is merely adequate.*
- *4 An essay that is strong.*
- *5 An essay that is outstanding.*

Papers whose average scores are 2.5 and higher, satisfy the entry level writing requirement; papers whose average scores are 2 and below, do not.

The essay assesses the bachelor's ability to think critically about a topic of general interest and to clearly express his thoughts about it in writing and to explain and support his reasoning for the position he takes.

Essay tasks are supply or constructed response type questions and can be the best way to measure the students' higher order thinking skills, such as applying, organizing, synthesizing, integrating, evaluating, or projecting while at the same time providing a measure of writing skills. The student has to formulate and write a response, which may be detailed and lengthy. The accuracy and quality of the response are judged by the graders.

The Scoring Guide expresses the criteria readers use to evaluate and score the essays. The guide is structured on a five-point scale. Readers are trained to use the Scoring Guide.

Instruction (Scoring Guide)

for the experts grading compositions (essays), written at entrance examination by the bachelors, wishing to enter the master's level of higher education institutions on specializations of directions HSM 020000 — Philology and HSM 040000 — Linguistics

The expert independently checks and evaluates the written works presented to him on a five-point scale, strictly observing the norms of evaluation established in the given instruction. During reading of the x-copy of the ciphered written work presented to him the expert reveals and rectifies the errors admitted in the writing, makes his notes connected with the written work (about quantity, character of errors, etc.) on free fields of the paper. The expert after grading each written work enters his code number, the mark (in figure and word) on the last page in corresponding cells and signs the work. Further in the protocol presented to him writes the necessary data (the information on the expert, the cipher of the graded written work, the mark (in figure and word), short opinion on the written work and then signs

the filled protocol, and hands over the graded written works and the filled protocol to the representative of the SSAC in the hall.

The mark is given with the account of the contents and literacy level. Written work is evaluated according to the following criteria:

- performance of written work in the language of specialization of the bachelor;
- understanding of essence of the given theme;
- construction of the plot and the composition under the perfect plan, connection of the introduction, the basic part and the conclusion;
- accuracy of materials, events and the facts described in written work;
- logical sequence, connection between paragraphs, ability to analyze events and the facts deeply, level of disclosure of the theme;
- the original approach to the theme, ability of the author to state his point of view soundly;
- a clear and intelligible statement of thoughts;
- observation of semantic communication between words;
- originality of style, richness and clearness of means of the image;
- observation of brevity, exclusion of pleonasm in the text (excessive expressions and words);
- conformity of written work to the established volume in 2-4 pages;
- drawing up of the written work with full observation of lexical, phraseological, grammatical and stylistic norms of the literary language and rules of spelling and use of punctuation marks.

During estimation of written works logical errors (non-observance of rules of sequence in the statement of thoughts, absence of conformity between a statement and conclusions, etc.), actual errors (distortion of the facts, misuse of citing, etc.), speech errors (a misuse of words in a proper place, an assumption of repetitions, etc.), grammatical errors, infringement of rules of spelling, misuse of rules of punctuation are also taken into consideration.

Along with requirements to the theme and language, the attention is given to stylistic features as well. While grading the written works the special attention goes on the disclosure of the theme, depth and independence of the judgements, clear position of the author and persuasiveness of thoughts.

The score of «5» is given for written works, opening the theme deeply and soundly. These works should show excellent knowledge of the theme, ability to analyze purposefully, to make conclusions and generalizations. The written work should be full, be written in a smooth literary language, according to requirements of the given style. The author presents accurate facts, has original approach to the subject, innovative style; demonstrates correct use of grammar, spelling, punctuation; readability and proper paragraph transitions. Presence of 1 mechanical, 1 spelling, 1 punctuation and 1 grammatical error in written work is allowed.

The score of «4» is given for full enough and convincing disclosure of the theme of the written work. The author in such a work should show good knowledge of the theme, ability to generalize and draw correct conclusions. In the work there can be small digressions, 2-3 mechanically admitted actual discrepancies. The assumption of 2 spelling and 2 punctuation, 1 spelling and 3 punctuation, 4 punctuation, and also 2 3 grammatical errors is possible.

The score of «3» is given for the composition in which the theme as a whole is revealed, but the unilaterality, insufficient completeness in disclosure of the material, or some separate discrepancies in the analysis of the actual material are found out. In the work there can be observed 4-5 actual discrepancies, 4 spelling either 4 punctuation, or 3 spelling and 5 punctuation, and also 4-5 grammatical errors.

The score of «2» is given if the theme is opened poorly and superficially, but there is no analysis, conclusions and generalizations, the sequence and coherence of the statements are

broken, poverty of the lexicon of the author is observed and there are many speech errors. 6-7 actual discrepancies, 7 spelling and 7 punctuation, or 6 spelling and 8 punctuation, or 5 spelling and 9 punctuation errors, and also 6 7 grammatical errors can be admitted in the work.

The score of «1» is given for the compositions which do not meet the requirements set out on written works where absence of connection between its separate parts, poverty of the lexicon are found out, and if there are numerous language, stylistic and speech errors in the work, very weak or complete lack of knowledge of the theme by the author is observed.

The score of «0» is given, if the work has not been performed at all, or irrespective of the level of its performance, any information or any hint about the bachelor is detected in the work.

Our recent research has indicated the validity of the master degree admission test as a predictor of students' achievement outcomes. An important consideration in the use of test results during the selection process for prospective students is that scores predict subsequent achievement outcomes similarly for all groups of students who take the test. The examination to master degree appears to be the standardized test used to determine the scholastic potential of master degree applicants. It is an aptitude test, thought to reflect intelligence or the capacity to learn. Test takers solve problems, synthesize information, and reason relationships between pieces of information, all of which are relevant to graduate studies. More specifically, the test includes a series of items designed to assess specific verbal, quantitative, and analytical skills. Master degree admission exam is designed to predict performance in graduate school through verbal, quantitative, and analytical reasoning questions. The exam scores can be considered as a meaningful source of information about an applicant's chance for success in a master program. The applicants admitted with higher scores are usually successful at the master level as well.

The test scores as well as essay scores provide common measures for comparing the qualifications of applicants and aid in the evaluation of grades. Different items used in combination with essays can indicate the strengths and weaknesses of individual students' preparation and may be useful for guidance, selection and placement purposes.

The admission tests and essays quantify applicant's critical thinking ability and creativity; the skills he will need for academic success at the master degree program.

We hope in the future our university admission tests will assess more comprehensively the full range of skills that are important for success, both at university and in life.