

Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA+)

Mastery Levels



Description

The Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA+) is a performance-based assessment provided by the Council for Aid to Education (CAE) that allows institutions to build, measure, and strengthen their students' critical thinking skills. The assessment, which has been used internationally for over 20 years, places students in real-world scenarios that require them to demonstrate their ability to analyze information, solve problems, and communicate effectively.



This process authentically measures a student's ability to think critically and mirrors the tasks students will be asked to perform in professional settings. Students who perform better on CLA+ are more likely to have positive post-higher education outcomes, such as higher employment, salary, and enrollment in graduate school (Zahner et al., 2022).

Standard Setting Overview

The standard setting for the CLA+ was conducted using the Bookmark methodology (Lewis et al., 1999) to establish fair and defensible levels of mastery. A panel of 12 experts, familiar with higher education students' knowledge, skills, and abilities, and representing various sectors (i.e., higher education, hiring managers from industry, leaders from non-profit organizations), established the profiles and cut scores for the assessment.

Emerging

Although students at the Emerging Level demonstrated some skills, they did not meet the minimum requirements to merit a Developing level of mastery. They do, however, have the **opportunity to increase their mastery level with improved analytic reasoning and written communication skills.**

Developing

Students at the Developing level:

- are able to **demonstrate** that they **read the documents** provided in the assessment.
 - make a **reasonable attempt at an analysis** of the details
 - are able to **communicate in a manner that is understandable** to the reader.
 - show some **judgment about the quality** of the evidence.
 - know the **difference between correlation and causality.**
 - are able to **read and interpret a bar graph**, though they may not necessarily be able to interpret a scatter plot or comprehend a regression analysis.
 - may not be able to read and interpret data tables.
-

Proficient

Students at the Proficient level:

- are able to **extract the major relevant pieces of evidence** provided in the documents
- can **provide a cohesive argument and analysis** of the task.
- are able to **distinguish the quality of evidence** in the documents and **express an appropriate level of conviction** in their conclusions.
- are able to **suggest additional research and/or consider counterarguments.**
- have the ability to **correctly identify logical fallacies**, accurately **interpret quantitative evidence**, and **distinguish the validity** of evidence and its purpose.
- have the ability to **determine the truth and validity** of an argument.
- know when a **graph or table is applicable** to an argument.

Accomplished

Students at the Accomplished level:

- are able to **analyze the information** provided in the documents, **extract relevant pieces of evidence**, and make **correct inferences** about this information.
- are able to **identify bias, evaluate the credibility of sources**, and **craft an original and independent argument**.
- when appropriate, will **identify the need for additional research** or further investigation.
- will **refute some**, but not all, of the **counterarguments** within the documents and use this information to **advance their argument**.
- have the ability to **correctly identify logical fallacies** and false claims.
- can accurately interpret and analyze qualitative and quantitative evidence (e.g., graphs and charts) and **incorporate this information** into their argument.
- present responses in a **cohesive and organized fashion**.

Advanced

Students at the Advanced level:

- demonstrate **consistency and completeness** and show a **command of their native language** in their responses.
- exhibit a level of sophistication not seen in the other mastery levels.
- **synthesize provided evidence**, are **comfortable with ambiguity**, and are able to **structure their thoughts**.
- **understand causality**, add new ideas, and introduce **new concepts** to create or **seek new evidence**.
- think about **conditions and nuances**, expressing finer points and caveats by **proposing conditional conclusions**.
- display **creativity and synthesis** while understanding the finer points in the documents.
- **synthesize information across multiple documents** and address **ambiguities in the data**, such as outliers and the effects of sample size.
- are able to **identify and highlight gaps in logic** and reasoning.
- **consistently reason analytically**, solve problems, and understand nuances when integrating information across multiple sources.

References

Lewis, D., M., Mitzel, H. C., Green, D. R., & Patz, R. J. (1999). *The Bookmark standard setting procedure*. McGraw-Hill.

Zahner, D., James, J., & Lehrfeld, J. (2022). Predictive validity of CLA+. In D. Van Damme and D. Zahner (Eds.), *Does higher education teach students to think critically?* OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/4cbe5b9c-en>.