

Jacksonville University  
English Department  
**ENGLISH 103 EXIT ESSAY**

The English department at JU requires students enrolled in ENGL 103 to take an exit exam focused on research, writing, and citation/documentation. These skills are emphasized throughout ENGL 103. Students must demonstrate proficiency in the above skills in order to pass the exam and exempt ENGL 214.

YOU MAY USE THIS SHEET FOR NOTES. WRITE YOUR ESSAY ON THE LINED PAPER.

- Select **one** of the following options and read the article carefully. You may wish to spend a few moments organizing your thoughts and writing down some ideas or an outline.
  
- Using appropriate conventions of organization, structure, and language, write a formal essay in response to the prompt, referring to the attached source article you selected. Your essay should demonstrate:
  - a. an effective introduction that establishes a focus for the essay
  - b. an essay body that is organized, unified, and developed
  - c. that you can properly integrate into the essay a summary, a paraphrase, and a quote (at least one of each should be evident in the essay), and cite each appropriately
  - d. appropriate documentation at the end of the essay
  - e. standard grammar and general mechanics

**Option I--“How Dumb Are We?”**

**PROMPT:** In what ways could our country address the elements outlined in the article that contribute to Americans' ignorance of politics and world affairs? Consider the experts' statements, statistics, and illustrative examples given in the article to help structure your argument.

**Option II – “Rich Brain, Poor Brain”**

**PROMPT:** Given the new information presented in the article about cognitive function related to socio-economic class, how should our society respond in its policies aimed at poverty? In your essay consider the evidence presented in the article along with your own experience, and suggest ways that our government and social policies can address the “cycle of poverty.”



# How Dumb Are We?

**NEWSWEEK gave 1,000 Americans the U.S. Citizenship Test--38 percent failed. The country's future is imperiled by our ignorance.**

by Andrew Romano March 20, 2011

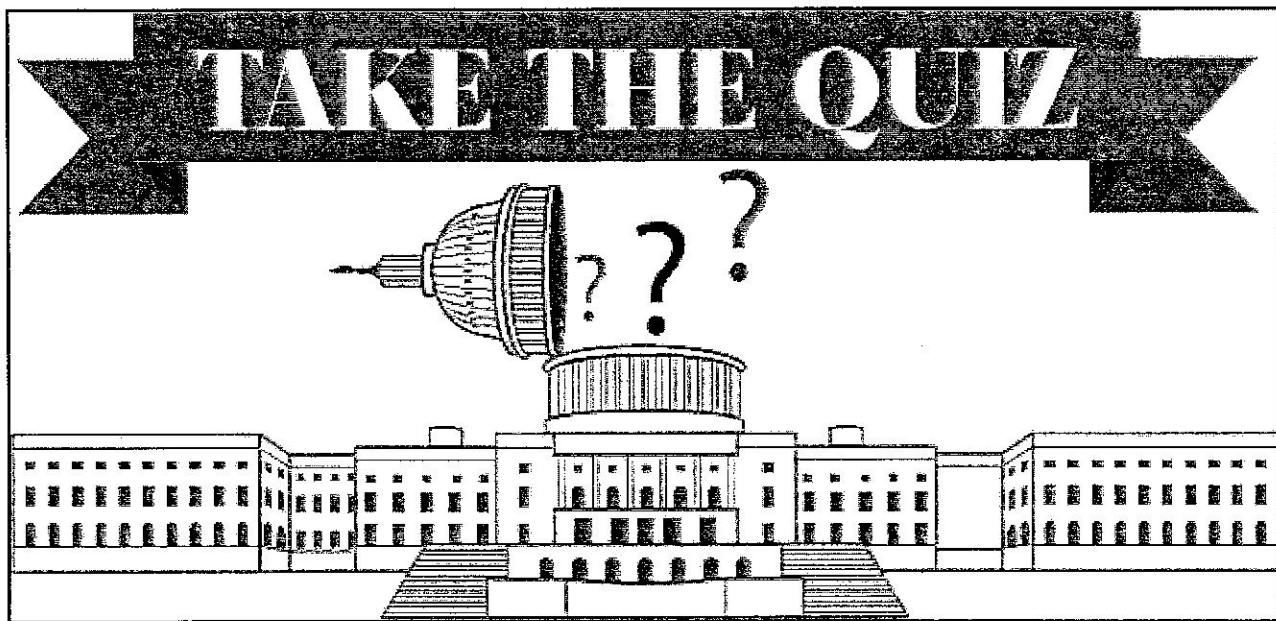


Illustration by Josh McKible for Newsweek

What Don't You Know? Take the Quiz.

They're the sort of scores that drive high-school history teachers to drink. When NEWSWEEK recently asked 1,000 U.S. citizens to take America's official citizenship test, 29 percent couldn't name the vice president. Seventy-three percent couldn't correctly say why we fought the Cold War. Forty-four percent were unable to define the Bill of Rights. And 6 percent couldn't even circle Independence Day on a calendar.

Don't get us wrong: civic ignorance is nothing new. For as long as they've existed, Americans have been misunderstanding checks and balances and misidentifying their senators. And they've been lamenting the philistinism of their peers ever since pollsters started publishing these dispiriting surveys back in Harry Truman's day. (He was a president, by the way.) According to a study by Michael X. Delli Carpini, dean of the Annenberg School for Communication, the yearly shifts in civic knowledge since World War II have averaged out to "slightly under 1 percent."

But the world has changed. And unfortunately, it's becoming more and more inhospitable to

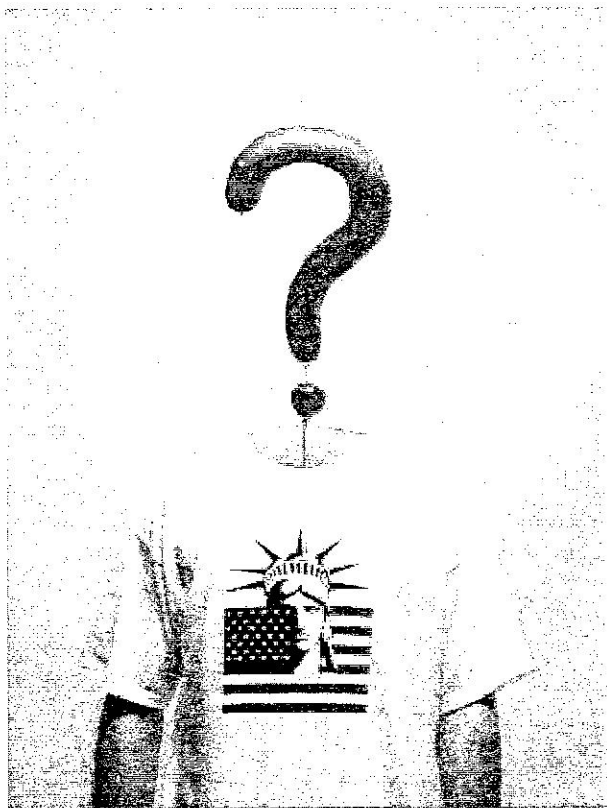
incurious know-nothings—like us.

To appreciate the risks involved, it's important to understand where American ignorance comes from. In March 2009, the *European Journal of Communication* asked citizens of Britain, Denmark, Finland, and the U.S. to answer questions on international affairs. The Europeans clobbered us. Sixty-eight percent of Danes, 75 percent of Brits, and 76 percent of Finns could, for example, identify the Taliban, but only 58 percent of Americans managed to do the same—even though we've led the charge in Afghanistan. It was only the latest in a series of polls that have shown us lagging behind our First World peers.

Most experts agree that the relative complexity of the U.S. political system makes it hard for Americans to keep up. In many European countries, parliaments have proportional representation, and the majority party rules without having to "share power with a lot of subnational governments," notes Yale political scientist Jacob Hacker, coauthor of *Winner-Take-All Politics*. In contrast, we're saddled with a nonproportional Senate; a tangle of state, local, and federal bureaucracies; and near-constant elections for every imaginable office (judge, sheriff, school-board member, and so on). "Nobody is competent to understand it all, which you realize every time you vote," says Michael Schudson, author of *The Good Citizen*. "You know you're going to come up short, and that discourages you from learning more."

It doesn't help that the United States has one of the highest levels of income inequality in the developed world, with the top 400 households raking in more money than the bottom 60 percent combined. As Dalton Conley, an NYU sociologist, explains, "it's like comparing apples and oranges. Unlike Denmark, we have a lot of very poor people without access to good education, and a huge immigrant population that doesn't even speak English." When surveys focus on well-off, native-born respondents, the U.S. actually holds its own against Europe.

Other factors exacerbate the situation. A big one, Hacker argues, is the decentralized U.S. education system, which is run mostly by individual states: "When you have more centrally managed curricula, you have more common knowledge and a stronger civic culture." Another hitch is our reliance on market-driven programming rather than public broadcasting, which, according to the *EJC* study, "devotes more attention to public affairs and international news, and fosters greater knowledge in these areas."



Phil Toledano for Newsweek

For more than two centuries, Americans have gotten away with not knowing much about the world around them. But times have changed—and they've changed in ways that make civic ignorance a big problem going forward. While isolationism is fine in an isolated society, we can no longer afford to mind our own business. What happens in China and India (or at a Japanese nuclear plant) affects the autoworker in Detroit; what happens in the statehouse and the White House affects the competition in China and India. Before the Internet, brawn was enough; now the information economy demands brains instead. And where we once relied on political institutions (like organized labor) to school the middle classes and give them leverage, we now have nothing. "The issue isn't that people in the past knew a lot more and know less now," says Hacker. "It's that their ignorance was counterbalanced by denser political organizations." The result is a society in which wired activists at either end of the spectrum dominate the debate—and lead politicians astray at precisely the wrong moment.

The current conflict over government spending illustrates the new dangers of ignorance. Every economist knows how to deal with the debt: cost-saving reforms to big-ticket entitlement programs; cuts to our bloated defense budget; and (if growth remains slow) tax reforms designed to refill our depleted revenue coffers. But poll after poll shows that voters have no clue what the budget actually looks like. A 2010 World Public Opinion survey found that Americans want to tackle deficits by cutting foreign aid from what they believe is the current level (27 percent of the budget) to a more prudent 13 percent. The real number is under 1 percent. A Jan. 25 CNN poll, meanwhile, discovered that even though 71 percent of voters want smaller government, vast majorities oppose cuts to Medicare (81 percent), Social Security (78 percent), and Medicaid (70 percent). Instead, they prefer to slash waste—a category that, in their fantasy world, seems to include 50 percent of spending, according to a 2009 Gallup poll.

Needless to say, it's impossible to balance the budget by listening to these people. But

politicians pander to them anyway, and even encourage their misapprehensions. As a result, we're now arguing over short-term spending cuts that would cost up to 700,000 government jobs, imperiling the shaky recovery and impairing our ability to compete globally, while doing nothing to tackle the long-term fiscal challenges that threaten ... our ability to compete globally.

Given our history, it's hard to imagine this changing any time soon. But that isn't to say a change wouldn't help. For years, Stanford communications professor James Fishkin has been conducting experiments in deliberative democracy. The premise is simple: poll citizens on a major issue, blind; then see how their opinions evolve when they're forced to confront the facts. What Fishkin has found is that while people start out with deep value disagreements over, say, government spending, they tend to agree on rational policy responses once they learn the ins and outs of the budget. "The problem is ignorance, not stupidity," Hacker says. "We suffer from a lack of information rather than a lack of ability." Whether that's a treatable affliction or a terminal illness remains to be seen. But now's the time to start searching for a cure.

Los Angeles Times

Op-Ed

*Rich Brain, Poor Brain*

*When it comes to decision-making, researchers find that money matters.*

October 18, 2013 | By Robert M. Sapolsky

There's a phrase that has haunted America for decades, one fraught with failure: "Breaking the cycle of poverty." Despite the ongoing efforts of government and a host of private foundations, income inequality continues to grow and the poor are ever more likely to remain poor.

Many factors favor the rich getting richer while the poor stagnate. The wealthy benefit from economies of scale, as the best prices and lowest interest rates are more readily available to those who least need them. The poor are perpetually in reactive mode, lurching from one crisis to another. The wealthy, on the other hand, can act proactively, spending smaller sums in advance to prevent costly crises later. And, of course, the U.S. taxation system makes it possible, as Warren Buffett has decried, for America's wealthiest investors to pay a lower tax rate, often, than their secretaries.

But there has always been an additional factor in the mix. Study after study has suggested that poor people are more likely than wealthy people to behave in ways that are imprudent and counterproductive. An extensive literature search shows that lower socioeconomic status is associated with a range of self-defeating behaviors, including more risk-taking (not using seat belts, for example), worse adherence to protocols (such as failing to complete a full course of a medicine) and poorer financial management (impulse buying, for example, or buying on credit, which adds considerably to an item's cost).

Why is this? One obvious explanation might be that those cognitive traits are what gave rise to poverty in the first place. But a recent paper in the prestigious journal *Science* suggests a novel contributor to this phenomenon.

Economist Anandi Mani of the University of Warwick, along with collaborators from Harvard, Princeton and the University of British Columbia, explored the concept of cognitive load. The fanciest, most recently evolved part of the human brain is the frontal cortex, a region that mediates executive function, decision-making, emotional regulation and long-term planning — in other words, it plays a key role in many of the things rich people tend to do better than poor people.

Naturally, the frontal cortex has a finite capacity. Extensive research shows that "frontal function" is impaired in people who increase their cognitive load with things such as distracting tasks, stress, sleep deprivation, pain or even resisting temptation (for example, if you make someone's frontal cortex work hard in order for them to resist eating chocolate, they are less capable immediately afterward of performing frontal cognitive tasks). What Mani found is that poor people, in general, have a greater cognitive load than rich people.

This makes sense. It's more cognitively burdensome, after all, to figure out how you're possibly going to pay this month's rent than to figure out where to vacation next summer. Mani's research supports this idea with fascinating data.

One of Mani's studies involved American volunteers from varied socioeconomic backgrounds who were categorized as either poor (having a below-average income) or rich (with an above-average income). Subjects were given a battery of tests of cognitive function, but just before testing, they were asked to think about how they would deal with a car that was having problems. Would they pay now for it to be fixed, take out a loan to pay for it or ignore the problem? Half the subjects were told that the issue was minor and would take only a small amount of money to fix; half were told it was a major, and expensive, problem.

When asked to think about a minor repair, the rich and the poor performed equally well on the cognitive tests (arguing against the notion that the poor make poorer decisions because they aren't as smart). But when the repair was described as costly, performance crashed dramatically in the poor but not the rich. In other words, having to reflect on tight finances increased cognitive load for poor people.

Intrigued by those results, Mani and colleagues took their research a creative step further and studied the phenomenon of cognitive load for poor people in the real world. Seeking subjects whose income normally fluctuates radically, they decided to focus on sugar cane farmers in India. The farmers are basically paid once a year, when they sell their harvest to sugar mills, and they have to make that money last until the next harvest. The researchers measured the farmers' cognitive function before the harvest, when money was tight, and again after the harvest, when farmers had fewer money worries. Various important controls were in place, including that nutrition and the amount of physical labor were the same pre- and post-harvest. The farmers who hadn't yet harvested (and been paid for) their crops scored dramatically worse than the post-harvest farmers.

Thus, both a careful lab experiment and a superb naturalistic field study suggest that being poor brings with it cognitive challenges. Your brain has to work mighty hard if you're constantly trying to figure out how to keep your head above water, and that is

likely to contribute to poor decision-making and counterproductive behavior. As if just being poor wasn't difficult enough.

*Robert M. Sapolsky is a professor of neuroscience at Stanford University and the author of "A Primate's Memoir," among other books. He is a contributing writer to Opinion.*