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Timed Essays

At some point during your college career, you will likely encounter a timed essay. Known collectively as timed essays, essay exams, or in-class essays, these essays require you to demonstrate disciplinary knowledge by producing a writing sample within a limited time period. Timed essays are popular because they allow teachers to grade students holistically in a very brief amount of time. This handout offers a few ways to prepare for timed essays and provides advice for how to answer a timed essay question effectively.

How to Prepare Before an Essay

Outlining

Whether in the form of lists, clusters of balloons, or idea maps, outlines are a key strategy when answering timed and revisable essay prompts. The best way to determine your individual [prewriting strategy](#) is to practice outlining. Outlines can help you stay on track if you feel lost during an essay, so the stronger the outline, the more you'll stay focused. Prior to a test, try to predict three to five possible essay topics and outline a possible essay response for each. If you can successfully identify and outline essay topics before the exam, you will have an advantage when answering the timed essay.

Study Skills

The more you can prepare for the exam itself, the easier you will find timed writing. Study for a timed essay like you would any other exam format: read the assigned texts, attend the lectures, take detailed notes, form study groups, and create a study guide or flashcards. As you study, look for general themes in the subject matter and consider how your professor has approached the material. Do you anticipate essay questions that ask you to synthesize material from several aspects of the course or to go into detail about some specific areas the course has focused on?

Time Management

Many essay exams include both short-answer and long-answer questions. How you budget your time during the test depends on whether you are a single-draft or multi-draft writer.

Single Draft Writers

These writers usually think about a prompt for several minutes before writing. They work well under pressure and prefer to “churn out” an essay at the last minute. Once they have finished an essay, they do not usually make any substantial changes.

After reading over all the essay questions, single draft writers should respond to shorter answer questions first before moving onto the final essay. This strategy will allow single draft writers to feel positive pressure during the essay exam and motivate them to complete a longer essay faster.

Multi-Draft Writers

These writers immediately start jotting ideas as they read the essay prompt. Multi-draft writers usually draft and revise outlines before drafting an essay response. As they write, multi-draft writers will usually stop after each paragraph to edit and revise. Unlike single-draft writers, multi-draft writers prefer to compose in an environment without time limits.

After reading over all the essay questions, multi-draft writers should briefly outline responses to short answer questions before tackling the long essay first. Because they usually do not work well under pressure, multi-draft writers should return to short answer questions once they have completed a satisfactory long essay, because the long essay is generally worth a greater amount of points.

Answering the Timed Essay

The UPOWER acronym offers a plan of action for writing timed essays. Each letter of UPOWER corresponds to a specific step in the timed essay process.

Understand the Prompt

Pick a Side

Outline

Write a Thesis/Introduction

Evidence and Ending

Revise

Understand the Prompt

Try rewriting the prompt in your own words to help you better understand what central question it is asking you to answer. It may help to reread the question and underline key words and phrases. Consider how many parts there are to the question: if multiple prompts are present, break down the prompts into subgroups. Determine if you should answer each question individually, or if the questions contain similar themes that should be answered as a group.

Pick a Side

The majority of timed writing prompts expect the writer to develop a central thesis or [claim](#). Decide what point you want to argue. Does the prompt already offer you a claim to defend or refute? If you are unsure what you want to argue, jotting a quick list of relevant ideas or evidence might help you focus in on a claim. Remember that sometimes the “right” answer may not always be the easiest to argue.

Outline

Imagine your outline as a blueprint to your essay; any time that you experience mid-essay writer’s block, a quick glance at the outline can sharpen your focus. You can outline your paper using a formalized list, an idea map, or another method that works for you. Practice outlining to determine what method helps you organize ideas concisely. In your outline, include your main point (thesis statement) and multiple supporting evidence points.

Write a Thesis/Introduction

Unless directed otherwise by the prompt, at a bare minimum your introduction should include a clear central claim—a thesis statement that indicates what you will be arguing in your essay. If you are already feeling time constraints, this claim may suffice for your introduction.

If you have more time, expand the introduction. Some writers will prefer to do this right away, while others will prefer to return to the introduction after the rest of the essay is complete. The introduction might include a brief outline of the supporting evidence you plan to use later in the essay, as well as a creative “hook” that draws your readers in.

Evidence and Ending

A strong thesis statement holds no weight without supporting evidence. As you craft the support for your claim, draw on the outline you sketched out previously. Be efficient with your time: only include information that supports your central claim. Remember that counterarguments can also serve as evidence: if you refute them well, they can strengthen your essay.

One way to help you clarify the connections between evidence and claim—and to help you make sure you’re staying on topic—is to provide a clear topic sentence or subclaim in each body paragraph. Don’t feel bound to the formulaic five-paragraph essay: evidence can be sufficient without coming in groups of three.

After writing your body paragraphs, you will need to conclude your essay. Even if the conclusion to your timed essay is brief, closure is important. Try not to simply rehash what you’ve just written. You may want to identify conflicting evidence or limitations of your thesis in this section.

Revise

As soon as you have finished writing, reread your original thesis statement in the opening paragraph. Does it still effectively represent the focus of your essay? As students write body paragraphs, they often diverge from their initial thesis statements. Graders will use this thesis statement as a guide for understanding your essay, so make sure your thesis matches your essay after you finish writing. If you still have time, carefully proofread your essay. Watch for simple spelling and grammatical errors, as well as greater problems of sentence flow and structure. Look over your essay one more time; revise or tweak as needed, and you’re done!

A final thought...

Keep your eye on the clock. While an ideal scenario would allow you to finish every essay component with time to spare, timed essays are timed for a reason: they require you to think under pressure. If you run out of time during a test, quickly jot down your remaining main ideas. Graders will be able to see the intended path of your essay and may reward you with a few extra points.