

Timed Essays



Writing a timed essay can be daunting, but practicing the following strategies can help increase your confidence and prepare you for the challenge. For more specific guidelines, check with your professor or the company administering the exam for information regarding their essay expectations.

Before the Exam

Most exam companies and many instructors provide sample questions, assessment guidelines, and even examples of effective essays. Use these tools to study and to practice writing full essay responses and essay outlines. Make sure you practice under the same time constraints you can expect on exam day.

During the Exam

Typically, you know what kind of essay you will be writing before the exam, but there may be some variability, so when you read the prompt or question, underline or circle key words to help you understand exactly what is being asked. These key words will dictate the content and organization of your essay. Below are key words commonly found in essay prompts:

Compare	Discuss similarities.
Contrast	Discuss differences.
Criticize	Discuss advantages and disadvantages.
Define	Explain the meaning. Describe attributes used to compare or contrast it to similar concepts.
Discuss	Give pro and con evidence which describes the relative strengths and weaknesses.
Explain	Give a series of statements describing reasons or causes, significance, and other areas of important or hard-to-understand concepts.
Illustrate	Give concrete examples.
Interpret	Write statements which clarify the meaning you find in the ideas or evidence you are writing about.
Justify	Give reasons why an act, a judgment, a behavior, etc., is rational or significant.
List	Write a number of features, events, actions, characteristics, etc. which together serve to explain or define something.

Gauge Your Time

Spend the most time on essays worth the most points. When possible, answer the questions in order of priority. Also, distribute your time within each response. For example, if you have 30 minutes to write, you could spend 5 minutes outlining and pre-writing, 20 minutes writing, and 5 minutes revising. Be aware of the clock to keep yourself on schedule.

Writing Your Essay

Organization

An organizational plan will help you write with more confidence and clarity. For longer essays, outline a list of points you wish to cover, noting the evidence you will use or counterarguments you may address. However, given the time constraints, spend no more than 2-5 minutes on this task.

Writing

The starting point of your essay will be your thesis. Make sure it addresses the prompt fully. Instead of focusing on trying to think of a catchy opening statement, concentrate on clearly stating your thesis, then supporting it.

Write clear, well-structured paragraphs. Each paragraph should directly address a specific aspect of the thesis. Present your ideas plainly and directly, remembering to give concrete evidence in support of your ideas. Use examples, facts, explanations, careful analysis, ideas from authoritative sources, etc. Don't just restate your thesis throughout your essay; show how it is true with some kind of concrete evidence. Clear topic sentences and transitions between ideas will also serve to emphasize your main points, making sure the reader doesn't overlook them.

Plan to write as much as you reasonably can about the relevant points of the essay, but avoid adding irrelevant and distracting details just to increase length. Remember, the reader is looking to see if you have a command of the expected content and language in addition to assessing your ability to think critically and write an essay of a sufficient length within the time allotted.

Revising

Leave enough time, at least 5-7 minutes, to review your work. In addition to making sure you have fulfilled the assignment, try to catch inconsistencies, omissions, incoherencies, and other weaknesses. Don't hesitate to strike out, rewrite, or add sentences—even paragraphs. You probably won't have time to rewrite or recopy large portions of your essay, but you can make minor changes. Check for minor errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation with your remaining revision time.