

Beating the Clock: Writing Timed Essays

No. 9 in the Writing Center Handout Series

Like any other test, a timed essay attempts to assess your knowledge of a subject. Unlike multiple choice questions or fill-in-the-blanks, however, an essay test also examines your critical thinking ability and your ability to communicate your ideas. Recognizing what challenges timed essays present and knowing how to be prepared can help you succeed at essay tests.

Be Prepared

Before taking the test, review your notes and quiz yourself on the information. Then, start connecting the ideas by asking questions:

- How does one idea (or fact, or detail) relate to another? Are these ideas similar? In what ways are they different? Does one idea grow out of another?
Asking these questions can prepare you for a "compare and contrast" essay question.
- Are there any recurring themes or ideas? Are there any trends in the evolution or development of ideas? What would the next logical change in this movement be?
These questions ask you to think about development, movements, and trends, and can prepare you for a question that asks you to describe a process or to speculate on the future of a topic.
- How do I feel about this topic? Which school of thought do I agree with? Are there flaws in an argument that I can expose based on my knowledge of the topic?
Evaluating your opinion by asking these questions can help you prepare for an essay question that asks you to argue one side of a debate.

Think First — and Fast

When you take the test, read the question first, then take a few moments to collect your thoughts before writing. Here are some tips:

- Be sure your essay answers all of the questions in the prompt but not necessarily in the same order. Use your answers to the essay questions as a brainstorming session.
- Formulate a thoughtful, clear thesis. As in any other essay, the thesis is the key to your argument.
- Jot down the supporting evidence you want to include in the essay.
- Organize your points in an outline you can follow.

This first step should only take a few minutes. If you have a choice of questions, quickly decide which question you will answer and prepare to write it. Changing your mind wastes time you should spend writing your response.

Write it

Following your outline, get your thoughts onto paper. Some tips on writing:

- Aim for clear, concise language. Don't use overly descriptive or wordy sentences.
- Avoid words you don't know, even if they sound intelligent. The goal is to make sure readers will understand you.
- Relate every bit of support back to your thesis.
- Write neatly and legibly. Skip lines if it helps make your writing easier to read.

Revise it

Save the last 7-10 minutes to read through your answers, making sure you didn't omit a word or use unclear phrasing. If a revision emergency occurs — i.e., you need to add three sentences to make yourself clear — write a new passage and refer your reader to it as you would with a footnote.

For more information on writing timed essays, see

<http://hyde.park.uga.edu/~crice/essaytest.html>
http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_essay.html



AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE

MCCAIN G-13
(404) 471 6242