

Timed Writing

In college and in life there will be occasions where you will need to compose essays and written responses under pressure and within a limited time frame. Here is some advice on how best approach these kinds of writing situations.

- To write a strong essay in a limited amount of time, know the important elements of an essay:

Focus: respond directly to the writing prompt (circle key words and annotate the text as you go), stay focused on thesis

Organization: put points in a logical order, use paragraph breaks and strong topic sentences to focus your writing

Development: lay in specific details for *each* paragraph (examples, facts, quotes, your own analysis) that directly support, explain, extend the discussion

Grammar-Punctuation-Spelling: set time aside at the end to correct sentence-level errors and clarity issues

- Have a time management plan for 3 activities: 10-15% of time for prewriting (circling key words, counting parts of prompt, making a rough outline), 70-80% of time writing the essay response, and 10-15% proofreading

The most common reasons for not-passing timed exams:

- Major flaws in organization
- Lacks a clear thesis statement
- Lack of development of main ideas
- Does not address the assigned topic
- Excessive flaws in grammar usage
- No clear beginning, middle, and end

Part 1: Important elements of expository writing:

FOCUS: One of the major skills that is being tested in a timed writing exam is your ability to write to the prompt. A prompt is simply the exam question or writing task. In order to successfully respond to a writing prompt you must do the following:

- (1) **Read** the prompt carefully (and often several times), circling key words
- (2) **Understand** what it is asking
- (3) **Identify** how many parts there are to the question
- (4) **Stay focused** on a consistent central idea while answering the prompt.

Thesis Statement: In a timed exam, your thesis will generally be your *answer* to the prompt. You will want to make this answer immediately clear to your reader, so it is best to put your thesis statement, which is your central idea stated in a sentence, in your introductory paragraph.

Opinion Words in the Thesis: The thesis usually contains a key word or controlling idea that limits its focus and reveals the writer's attitude toward the topic. When you answer the exam prompt, you will be revealing *your* attitude toward the topic. For example, if you were asked what your favorite spare time activity is and why, you could answer "backpacking," but this answer alone doesn't reveal your *attitude* toward it. In the sentence, "I enjoy backpacking in my spare time because it is both challenging and relaxing," the descriptive words "challenging" and "relaxing" reveal the writer's attitude toward the topic and establish what the essay will now focus on proving: *why* backpacking is challenging and relaxing.

In order to write a focused and unified essay, you must stay directly focused on the topic and controlling idea presented in the thesis statement. Do not stray from your thesis statement.

ORGANIZATION:

Select an appropriate number of supporting points, depending both on your argument and your allotted writing time, and present them in a clear order, so the essay proceeds smoothly and logically from one point to the next. Be sure to put your main supporting points into separate paragraphs, so there is a clear beginning, middle and end as opposed to a long, uninterrupted block of text. Here are some common methods of organization:

- *climax:* When ideas are presented in the order of climax, they build toward a conclusion and save the most dramatic examples for the end.
- *complexity:* Ideas are ordered from simple to complex
- *familiarity:* Ideas are ordered from most familiar to least
- *audience appeal:* Points are ordered from "safe" ideas to challenging ones
- *comparison/contrast:* Whether a comparison-contrast essay stresses similarities or differences, it may be patterned in one of two ways:

(1) Block Style: Look at one subject entirely and then compare it to another by using the same points. For example:

- I. Domino's Pizza
 - a. Price
 - b. Quality
- II. Round Table Pizza
 - a. Price
 - b. Quality

(2) Point by Point: Look at the two subjects together, comparing one aspect at a time. For example:

- I. Price
 - a. Domino's Pizza
 - b. Round Table Pizza
- II. Quality
 - a. Domino's Pizza
 - b. Round Table

DEVELOPMENT:

Generally, each of your body paragraphs should contain a topic sentence which directly supports your thesis statement and also contains a generalization in need of support. In order to provide that support, ask yourself, "How do I know that this is true?" Your answer will suggest how to develop the paragraph.

Evidence: In order to construct a well supported and convincing argument, you will need to flesh out the ideas presented in your topic sentences. Avoid a series of skimpy paragraphs which generally lack development. Provide concrete and specific detail for *each* supporting point in the form of examples, quotes and paraphrases from the text, illustrations, facts, personal knowledge, personal experiences, etc.

For example, in the thesis statement, "I enjoy backpacking in my spare time because it is both challenging and relaxing," perhaps your first supporting point will be how you enjoy the physical challenge backpacking provides. A possible topic sentence could then read, "Because I was born with asthma, I've always been afraid of strenuous physical activity, but when I started improving at backpacking, I realized that I could overcome this limiting fear." Now a strong essay would go on to provide a concrete example of *when* the writer came to this realization. Was it reaching the top of El Capitan for the first time without an asthma attack? Was it after suffering an attack and then carrying on ten miles in the rain to successfully reach his/her destination? Be as specific and detailed as possible in your support. If you can't develop a supporting point with evidence, then it's probably best to replace that point with a stronger one.

GRAMMAR—PUNCTUATION—SPELLING:

In a timed writing situation, you will not have a lot of time to spend worrying over the spelling of a word or the placement of a comma. However, you also don't want to turn in a piece of writing that contains excessive grammatical, punctuation, and/or spelling errors. Therefore, set time aside at the end to proofread your essay.

- (1) Double space so when you proofread and want to cross out confusing sentences or misspellings or add left out words or examples, you will have room and won't risk confusing your reader.
- (2) Read carefully to catch confusing sentences, errors in subject-verb agreement, verb tenses, run together sentences, etc., and look for opportunities to join sentences.
- (3) If you discover a place where more concrete detail is needed, add examples and evidence as needed.

Part 2: Time Management

Since taking a timed exam puts you in the situation of having a limited amount of time to create a focused, organized, well supported essay, you better have a clear plan of how you will use your allotted time *before* beginning the exam. Suggested breakdown of time:

- 10-15% of time: **Prewriting:**
- (1) Read the prompt carefully, circling key words
 - (2) Cluster or list to determine your main supporting points and strongest evidence; be sure you have a working thesis (see below on clustering/listing).
- 70-80% of time: **Write the essay:**
- (4) Write your essay following the outline.
 - (5) Skip lines in case you want to make some changes when you're proofreading after you complete the essay.
- 10-15% of time: **Proofreading:**
- (6) Proofread your essay carefully adding missed evidence, catching misspellings, putting in left out words, revising confusing sentences, joining sentences, etc..

Part 3: Key Words

When you read the prompt, pay close attention to *how* the essay question is phrased. It is very important to focus on the *exact* assigned task and to address *all parts* of the prompt. If you don't answer the question asked, you'll probably receive little or no credit for your work.

Describe: Write about the subject so the reader can easily visualize it; tell how it looks or happened. Use adjectives, adverbs and descriptive language to paint a mental image for you reader.

Compare: Analyze the similarities *and* the differences between two or more items.

Contrast: Look only at the differences between two or more items.

Explain: Give the meaning of something often answering the question "why"?

Discuss: A more open-ended approach asking the writer to provide a broader range of possibilities.

Argue: (or present a point of view or take a position) Usually requires the writer to take only one point of view (either pro or con) and substantiate that position. Don't be concerned about taking the "right" or "wrong" position; just support a position soundly and consistently.

Analyze: Break the subject (an object, event, or concept) down into parts, and explain the various parts.

Critique: Point out both the positive and negative aspects of the topic.

Evaluate: Give your opinion of the value of the subject; discuss its strengths and weaknesses.

- Illustrate:** Make the point or idea by giving examples.
Trace: Tell about an event or process in chronological order.
Prove: Show that something is true by giving facts or logical reasons.
State: Give the main points in a brief, clear form.

Part 4: Making a Plan

Before you jump into writing a timed essay, know exactly where you are going, so you don't risk going off topic (which is very easy to do in a hurried timed situation). To ensure that you have strong and focused support of your thesis statement, set aside some time, after you carefully read the prompt and before you begin writing, to create a rough plan. Here are two helpful methods that are commonly used to select and organize possible supporting points.

Clustering: One technique to help you generate and organize ideas is called clustering. Clustering provides you a sort of informal map. To cluster your ideas, start out with a topic or question and draw a circle around it. Then connect related ideas to that circle and continue in that way. Clustering provides a mental picture of the ideas you generate. It can help you organize your material as you think of it. You can also eliminate supporting points that you can't find strong evidence to support.

Listing: Another method used to organize your ideas is called listing. This is the most informal kind of outline in which you jot down your main points and possible supporting examples and detail. This kind of outline is for you only, and you don't need to worry about making it more comprehensive if it does the job for you.

Part 5: Practice prompts

Prompt—

"History repeats itself.

Has to.

Nobody listens."

--Steve Turner

A famous maxim says that those who fail to remember and learn from the events of history—economic failures, wars, injustices, strife—are doomed to repeat them. By learning from historical events, by listening to the message of history, a nation or people can avoid repeating the errors of the past. Identify one such significant past event, discuss its effects and explain why we should remember it.

Prompt—

The texts we have read this semester are all from foreign countries, which represent different cultures and ways of life. Using three of the texts we have read this semester, compare the issues concerning patriarchy in each. Using examples and evidence from the texts, explain what each author conveys about the realities and outcomes of patriarchy in that particular society. Finally, analyze what global

assertions can be made by comparing the patriarchal aspects of these cultures to one another as well as to our own culture in the U.S.

Prompt—

Compare the different ways that four of the authors that we have read this semester used activism to change their current system and to bring about social change, and explain what we can learn about effective approaches through this comparison. Finally, argue which of the four you feel was the most successful as a revolutionary and as you make your case, be sure to define "revolutionary" and "success" according to you, and explain the implications and importance of your findings.