

Summary Chart

HOW TO WRITE TIMED ESSAYS

1. Prepare for the assignment outside of class.

- *Decide how to order your ideas, arguments, or findings.*
- *Review the course material.*
- *Analyze the assignment or test questions if the teacher distributes them prior to the test day.*
- *Anticipate possible assignments or test questions if the teacher does not distribute them early.*
- *Imagine possible responses to the assignments or test questions.*
- *Discuss possible or actual assignments, test questions, and responses with classmates.*

2. Read and analyze the assignment or test question.

- *Identify the assignment or test question.*
- *Analyze the verbs to determine the nature of your response.*
- *Clarify the rhetorical goal of the assignment or test question.*

3. Plan your essay or answer.

- *Develop your thesis.*
- *Outline your response, formally or informally.*
- *Note on your outline where you might effectively incorporate source material.*

4. Draft your essay or answer.

- *Write an opening paragraph that, at a minimum, introduces the topic of your response, indicates your thesis, and captures your reader's interest.*
- *Construct your response paragraph by paragraph, following the outline you already designed.*
- *When new ideas come to you as you compose your response, note them appropriately on your outline and include them in your essay.*
- *Be sure to write a concluding paragraph.*

5. Revise your essay or answer.

- *First, check to see that your response is appropriate, that it properly addresses the assignment or test question.*
- *Check each paragraph for adequate development.*
- *Check for problems with organization, especially the use of effective topic sentences and transitions.*
- *Check for clear word choice.*

6. Proofread your essay or answer.

- *Find and correct errors that might interfere with a reader's ability to understand your essay.*
- *Find and correct the types of errors you most commonly make when writing.*
- *Correct any spelling or grammatical errors you find.*

Continue reading for a detailed discussion of timed essays.

Writing a timed essay is stressful for any writer. However, understanding the purpose of the assignment and approaching the task in a systematic way can help you write with confidence.

A RANGE OF TIMED WRITING ASSIGNMENTS, PURPOSES, AND CONDITIONS

Among the most common timed writing assignments are essay test questions, comprehensive finals, and take-home examinations. The writing conditions for these assignments can vary. Sometimes teachers give you the actual assignment or a list of possible writing tasks prior to the test so you can plan your answer; other times, they do not. Sometimes you can consult your notes and source texts as you compose your answer; other times, you may not. Each type of timed writing assignment and each set of test conditions call for a different type of preparation and a different set of test-taking skills.

COMMON TIMED WRITING TASKS

When teachers assign *essay test questions*, they usually expect fully developed, clear, organized responses that directly answer the question being asked and reveal your understanding of the course material. Assignments may ask you to summarize readings or lectures, critique the course material, draw connections among the authors studied in class, explore the relationship between the course material and your own experience, apply course material to new situations, or argue for or against positions or theories presented in the course. Most teachers expect essay test answers to have a solid beginning, middle, and end; to be clearly written; and to make appropriate references to material studied in the course. Being able to write strong responses to essay test questions is an especially important skill for college writers. A number of studies of writing requirements across the curriculum reveal that answering essay test questions is the most common writing task for students regardless of their major.

Given at the end of a course, *comprehensive finals* ask you to work with information presented over the entire term. You typically have more time in class to write these responses than you do when writing essay test answers, so you must plan your essays more carefully. Teachers typically expect you to make multiple references to course material in a comprehensive final; to present fairly sophisticated critiques of the readings, lectures, or laboratory exercises; to synthesize information in new and interesting ways; and to develop your own positions on issues covered in class.

Unlike the other types of timed writing tasks, you can complete *take-home examinations* outside of class. Take-home examinations can consist of a series of essay test questions or a single, comprehensive writing task. Teachers will typically tell you how much time they expect you to spend writing your

response and trust you to keep to those guidelines. Sometimes they will require you to type your answer; other times, they will want you to turn in handwritten responses, perhaps in examination booklets they distribute in class. Teachers who ask you to write take-home examinations typically expect your answers to be more comprehensive, more organized, and more formally correct than responses written in class. They typically do not, however, expect the prose to be as polished as it would be in a formal essay. Remember to discuss the grading criteria with your teacher if you have any questions. Because most timed writing assignments in college are not completed outside of class, the rest of this chapter focuses on in-class essays.

RHETORICAL AIMS

In-class, timed writing assignments usually have one of three rhetorical goals: exposition, argument, or personal expression. Understanding the rhetorical goal of the assignment—whether you are being asked to convey information, argue a point, or share your own responses to course material—is the most important aspect of composing a successful timed essay. If you write an expository essay when the teacher expects an argument, you will be missing the entire point of the assignment.

Expository assignments ask you to inform your reader about a topic. Some expository assignments ask you to recapitulate information covered in class (“What were the major judicial reforms instituted by Henry V?”). Others require you to compare and contrast various source texts (“What are the theories of childhood language acquisition offered by Piaget and Vygotsky?”). These assignments do not ask you to assert and defend a position of your own; instead, your grade is largely based on how clearly you convey information.

Argumentative assignments, in contrast, ask you to explain and support a position of your own on a topic (“How successful were the judicial reforms instituted by Henry V?” or “In presenting his theory of language acquisition, who is more convincing, Piaget or Vygotsky?”). Your thesis asserts a position that you then explain and defend in the body of your essay. When evaluating argumentative timed writing assignments, teachers tend to focus on the clarity and accuracy of your position, the quality of textual support you supply, and the sophistication of your reasoning skills. Writing successful timed arguments is difficult, requiring you to employ a wide range of reading, writing, and reasoning skills. As discussed later in this chapter, dividing this task into manageable subtasks and preparing yourself thoroughly before you begin to write can help you complete the assignment successfully.

Responsive timed assignments ask you to convey your subjective reactions to course material (“What do you think about the judicial reforms instituted by Henry V?” or “Based on your own experience, whose theories of language acquisition make more sense, Piaget’s or Vygotsky’s?”). Here the teacher wants

to know your reaction to the information covered in class, what you liked or did not like, understood or did not understand, found useful or did not find useful. More important, the teacher also wants to know the basis of your response—you need to explain why you responded in a particular way. When evaluating these assignments, teachers typically look for clarity and comprehensiveness—whether they fully understand your response to the material and the basis for your reaction.

ACCESS TO SOURCE MATERIAL

In most cases, when writing your timed essay, you will not be able to consult the material you studied in class. Nevertheless, your teachers will expect you to refer to this material in your essay, citing specific and relevant authors, studies, findings, dates, or criticism. While they may not expect direct quotations of this material, they will certainly expect you to summarize and paraphrase information and data accurately and appropriately.

Sometimes teachers will assign open-note tests, allowing you to consult readings, class notes, or other source material as you compose your response. Having access to this course material can be both a blessing and a curse. Being able to consult the material means you have less to memorize; as you write, you can look up information you need. You are also in a better position to quote material in your answer since you can copy it directly from your readings or notes. However, since you have access to the material when you write, your teachers are likely to expect your answers to be more thorough and precise, criteria they will employ when evaluating your response. Open-note tests also require you to manage your time more carefully than do closed-note tests. Many students fail to finish their essays in the allotted time because they spend too much time flipping through their textbooks to find information they need or copying long quotations into their answers. You ought to prepare yourself equally well for both open- and closed-note tasks so that you spend most of your time responding to the question or questions being asked.

ACCESS TO POSSIBLE ASSIGNMENTS

College teachers differ in letting students know prior to the test day what the assignment will be. Some teachers distribute the assignment days or weeks in advance, answer any questions you have about the task, and even encourage students to discuss the assignment with each other outside of class. Other teachers may distribute several possible questions or assignments ahead of time but not tell you before the day scheduled for the timed writing which assignment they want you to complete. Still other teachers never let their students know prior to the test day what the assignment will be. When the students come to class, they see the question for the first time.

QUALITIES OF A GOOD TIMED ESSAY

Timed essays can assume many forms. Successful responses, however, have several features in common. They are appropriate, concise, supported, organized, and clear and correct.

- *Appropriate*—the response addresses the question being asked.
- *Concise*—the response is direct and to the point.
- *Supported*—the response correctly and effectively refers to course material to explain or defend statements or assertions.
- *Organized*—the response is built around an introduction, body, and conclusion united by a thesis statement, topic sentences, and transitions.
- *Clear and correct*—the response avoids sentence-level errors and word choice errors that inhibit understanding.

APPROPRIATE

The most common—and most costly—error students make when completing timed writing assignments is failing to answer the question being asked. They may write an interesting essay, but—given the assigned task—their response is inappropriate. Students write inappropriate responses when they misunderstand or disregard the wording of the assignment, develop an idea that does not relate clearly to the rest of their essay, panic and write anything to fill the page, or compose an essay that tries to achieve the wrong rhetorical aim—for example, composing an expository essay when the assignment calls for an argumentative response. Preparing yourself to write prior to the test day, carefully analyzing the wording of the assignment, and asking the right questions as you compose and revise your work can help ensure that your responses are appropriate.

CONCISE

Because you are writing under timed conditions, your prose has to be direct, focused, and precise. Your response should focus on the question being asked, so avoid the temptation to follow tangents that take you too far afield. In addition, make your sentences as precise and economical as possible. With timed writing, if you can say something in two words rather than three, say it in two; if you can adequately develop an idea in one paragraph rather than two, develop it in one. Remember, the time you take to work on one section of your response leaves less time to work on other sections.

SUPPORTED

Almost all of the timed essays you write in school will ask you to work with the material you covered in class. When appropriate, your response to the assignment should refer to this material—the more specific you can be, the better. Generally,

in academic writing—even in timed essays—supported assertions carry more weight and are more convincing than unsupported assertions. In open-note tests, try to quote source material in your response. In closed-note tests, you are more likely to summarize and paraphrase information. Integrating course material into your answer will help you produce effective, convincing timed essays.

ORGANIZED

Timed essays require careful planning and organization. Like any formal writing assignment, a timed essay ought to have an effective opening paragraph, a clear thesis that guides and controls the body of the essay, topic sentences that direct the paragraphs, and transitions throughout that help unite the piece and lead readers through the essay. Perhaps more than any other type of assignment, timed writing tasks test your ability to plan responses quickly, apply the organizational skills you have learned in school, and solve problems as they arise.

CLEAR AND CORRECT

When evaluating timed writing assignments, most instructors are less strict about sentence-level errors than they might be with more formal assignments. They know correct punctuation, spelling, and grammar are important, but they understand that writing under time constraints may prevent students from adequately revising and proofreading their work. Not every instructor, however, is so forgiving. It is a good idea, therefore, to talk to your instructor about her evaluation criteria. Of course, your essay will not succeed if errors make it too difficult to read the piece. If nearly every sentence contains a mistake, if sentence boundaries are confused, if the language is incomprehensible, you are much less likely to get a passing grade. As discussed in more detail later in this chapter, part of learning how to write timed essays successfully is understanding, locating, and correcting the errors that most seriously affect a reader's ability to understand your essay and the errors that you, as a writer, most commonly make.

WRITING TIMED ASSIGNMENTS

Adopting a process approach to composing timed writing assignments will help you complete them more easily and successfully. As with any other assignment, your best approach to composing a timed essay is to divide the task into a series of manageable steps: carefully analyze the assignment, engage in some planning, draft a response, and then reread and revise what you have written until you feel you have produced your best work. The trick with timed assignments is to complete the process before time runs out. Below

are several steps you should consider following as you prepare for and draft timed writing assignments. Modify these suggestions to suit your individual composing style.

PREPARE FOR THE ASSIGNMENT OUTSIDE OF CLASS

Success at timed writing assignments depends on preparation well before you sit down to write the first word of the essay. Because timed writing assignments test not only your writing skills but also your study skills, engaging in a series of steps prior to test day can help you write a strong essay.

First, be sure you *review the course material* before you sit down to write your essay. Besides reviewing the assigned readings and your class notes, discuss the material with your classmates. Together, try to identify the most important information, findings, or theories covered in class. Even if you will be able to consult your notes or readings as you write your essay, studying the material and discussing it with others before the test will still be helpful: you will form a better understanding of the information, you will likely gain insights from others, and you will commit more information to memory, saving yourself time later as you write your response.

Second, if your instructor does not distribute the assignment prior to the test, *try to anticipate what he might ask*. Trying to imagine what the teacher is likely to ask will help you sort through the course material, identifying what is truly important. Instead of distributing test questions or timed writing assignments prior to the test day, some teachers, especially in the natural sciences, place copies of old examinations or assignments on a web page or on reserve at the library or department office. If your teacher does this, be sure to consult these old assignments as you study. Again, working with others to anticipate assignments or test questions can be very productive. Anticipating test answers can be dangerous, however, if you convince yourself that you have psyched out the teacher and know what the assignment will be or if you decide what you want to write even if it is not what the teacher ends up assigning. In either case, you will likely compose an inappropriate response. If you accurately predict the assignment, then you are that much more prepared on the day you write your essay. If you do not accurately predict it, you need to plan your essay in response to the task at hand.

Finally, as you study for the test, *work out possible responses or answers*. If the teacher distributes the assignment before the test, give yourself plenty of time to plan your answer. If you have to guess what the assignment might be, you should still determine how you would answer each possible question. When planning these responses, work closely with the course's source texts. Decide which readings or parts of readings would help you write particular responses, and select the quotes or examples you think would be good to incorporate into your essay. Even if you do not end up using this material in your response, simply working through it prior to the assignment will help you master the material.

Working with others to develop possible answers or responses can be quite helpful. As a group, you can brainstorm possible responses and critique ideas. However, such collaboration should only supplement your individual efforts to prepare for the timed writing assignment. Even when you work with others, you should still develop your own response to the assignment. Students composing nearly identical in-class essays will likely be suspected of plagiarism. The purpose of group work prior to writing a timed essay is to gain a better understanding of the course material, to work out a range of possible responses, and to establish the relative strengths and weaknesses of those responses, not to develop a single, shared “group” response.

READ AND ANALYZE THE ASSIGNMENT OR TEST QUESTION

Carefully analyzing the language of the assignment is crucial when you are writing timed essays. As you read the assignment, you need to make a series of decisions concerning the instructor’s intention. First, you may need to identify the actual assignment itself. Sometimes teachers will ask a series of questions to get you thinking about the topic before they ask the test question or state the assignment. In such a case, it is easy to confuse the actual assignment and the accompanying questions. Consider, for example, the following assignment used in a course on Native American history. Assume you are a student seeing it for the first time and have only fifty minutes to write your response:

Consider the relationship between the Hopewell and Fort Ancient cultures. Are they truly distinct? Do they represent separate cultures, or is it more accurate to claim they represent different stages of development of only one culture? How might researchers answer this question?

What, exactly, is the test question in this example? Should your answer address similarities and differences between the Hopewell and Fort Ancient cultures, or should it focus on research methodologies more generally, using ancient Native American cultures as examples? Should it do both? Making the wrong decision would lead to an inappropriate response. If you have trouble understanding the assignment, be sure to ask your teacher for clarification.

Second, pay particular attention to the verbs the teacher uses in the assignment. The verbs often will tell you what to write and indicate how you might organize your response. Below are some verbs you are likely to find in timed writing assignments, along with an explanation of their common meanings:

<i>Verb</i>	<i>Writing Task</i>
analyze	divide something into parts
compare	show similarities
contrast	show differences
define	explain the meaning of something
discuss	examine multiple sides of an issue, being as comprehensive as possible

explain	clarify what others think is confusing
illustrate	give examples of something
prove	defend a position with evidence that others will find convincing
summarize	briefly recount the main points of something

PLAN YOUR ESSAY OR ANSWER

Once you have a clear idea of what the teacher is asking you to do in your response, you need to plan your answer. A common mistake students make when writing timed essays is beginning their responses before adequately planning their answers. Without adequate planning, responses are usually unfocused and underdeveloped. Taking time to plan your answer may be nerve-racking—you may feel pressured to begin composing your response immediately. However, the three to five minutes you spend planning your response will actually make it easier for you to write your essay and will likely result in a better paper.

At a minimum, before you begin to draft your response, you need to develop your thesis and outline your essay. In most cases, your thesis should be a one-sentence answer to the question being asked. You will develop and support this thesis in the body of your essay. Write out and revise your thesis on scrap paper or even on the assignment sheet itself until you are satisfied with its wording. Next, outline your response on the same sheet of paper. This outline does not need to be formal or elaborate. It can be simply a list of the main points you want to make, preferably in the order you plan to present them. Make sure the order of ideas presented in your outline matches the order in which the ideas are presented in your thesis. Finally, you might want to indicate on your outline where you can insert source material into your response—which authors you can cite, which examples you can use, which quotations you can employ. The time you spend at this stage of the writing process will help you draft an effective answer, for you will continually refer to this outline as you write your essay.

DRAFT YOUR ESSAY OR ANSWER

Once you have taken a few minutes to draft your thesis and plan your response, you will be able to compose your response section by section. First, *write an effective opening*, one that introduces the topic of your essay, states your thesis, and captures your reader’s interest through a provocative question, an interesting observation, a significant quotation, or some other device that will help your essay stand out from others completed in class. This opening section should remain brief—only a paragraph or two.

Once you have completed your introduction, *compose your response paragraph by paragraph using your outline as a guide*. Try to begin each new section of your essay with a clearly stated topic sentence that both introduces the

idea you will develop and refers back to the language of your thesis. As you compose each paragraph, look for opportunities to make references to the material covered in class—quoting or paraphrasing readings or lectures, supplying documentation when necessary.

The actual process of writing your response may lead you to form some new ideas about the assignment, ideas you want to include in your essay. When this happens, do not trust your insight to memory—you already have too much on your mind in a timed writing situation. Instead, go back to your outline and quickly jot down the new idea where you think you might want to include it in your essay. If you need to insert this material in a section of the essay you have already written, you can do so: write out the passage, bracket it, and then indicate with marginal arrows, lines, or notes where you would like it to go. Most teachers will honor your intention and read the paragraphs in the order you indicate.

Finally, *be sure to write a concluding paragraph*. Many students forget to include a conclusion when they write timed essays, letting their responses end with the last point they make. Writing a conclusion gives you the opportunity to reemphasize important assertions, to bring your essay to a logical end, and to echo the strategy you employed to capture your reader's interest in the opening paragraph, giving your essay symmetry and your reader a sense of closure.

REVISE YOUR ESSAY OR ANSWER

Just as you should set aside time to plan your response before you begin to write, you need to reserve time at the end of the process to revise your work before you turn it in. Since you will have only a limited amount of time to revise, you need to work toward a limited set of revision goals.

First, as you reread your work, *make sure your response is appropriate*. Review the assignment, then your response, checking to see that you have met all of the assignment's requirements. Cut material that is not relevant, and add any examples, explanations, or elaborations you think you need. Delete material by drawing a single line through it. Add material by placing a caret below the place where you want it to go and write the material in the space above the line. As you revise your work at this point, you want to be sure you have met the demands of the assignment and have been true to your own intentions as well.

Second, *check each paragraph for adequate development*. Do you need to add another illustrative example? Can you make another reference to a source text? Does a particular assertion need further elaboration? Now is the time to add any needed support.

Next, *check for any problems with organization*. As you revise, add any transition words or phrases that might make your essay easier to read. If you need to insert a paragraph break, now is the time to indicate with a paragraph marker (¶) where you would like it to go. If you need to eliminate a paragraph break,

in the margin of your paper write “no paragraph.” If you failed to include an introductory or concluding paragraph, now is the time to add one.

Finally, *check for clear word choice*. Have you used any terms that might confuse your reader? Is your language as precise and economical as it can be? Make any needed changes.

PROOFREAD YOUR ESSAY OR ANSWER

Because you have very little time to proofread your work in a timed writing situation, first *proofread for the types of errors that seriously interfere with a reader's ability to understand your essay*, especially errors involving sentence boundaries. For example, try to correct any problems with sentence fragments, run-on sentences, comma splices, and missing end punctuation. Second, keeping in mind your known weaknesses as a writer, *proofread for the errors you are most likely to make*. If you know you typically forget to include apostrophes in possessive case constructions, proofread for that. If you know you misspell certain words, check them in your essay. If you have problems with capitalization, correct any such errors you find. Use standard proofreading symbols to indicate any corrections you make.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Writing in-class essays tests not only your ability to think, plan, and write under pressure, but also your ability to manage time. Here are a few tips to help you write successfully against the clock. First, *prepare, prepare, prepare*. The more time you spend preparing yourself for a timed writing assignment, the easier it will be for you to complete the task once the clock is running. Second, *adopt a process approach to completing the assignment*. When you get the assignment, do not dive right into writing. Instead, carefully analyze the assignment and reserve time to plan, revise, and proofread your work. As a general guideline, if you have fifty minutes to write your essay, take five minutes to plan your response, forty minutes to draft and revise your answer, and five minutes to proofread the final draft. Finally, *watch the clock as you write*. Many students become so focused on completing the assignment that they forget to monitor how quickly time is passing. If possible, bring a watch to class on the day you write your essay. If that is not possible, ask the teacher to keep track of time for you on the blackboard.