

WRITING ESSAY EXAMS

WRITING ESSAYS on timed exams is a particularly stressful form of writing. While exams always create a little anxiety (and that's a good thing — nervousness actually helps us study more efficiently), here are some strategies that can help you feel more confident.

PREPARING FOR YOUR EXAM

1. If you know what form your exam will take, practice writing under similar conditions:

- Create a plausible exam question.
- Set a timer.
- See what happens!

NOTE: *Not only is this a great way to reduce your anxiety levels, but it will also quickly highlight the gaps in your understanding.*

2. Focus your study around generating ideas for essays. Pay particular attention to:

- Keywords
- Themes
- References that could be used for many topics.

TIP! *Your course outline or class notes are a good place to look for these ideas.*

3. Creating possible essay questions is another great way to study your material, because to write an essay question, you are already formulating a possible (essay) answer.

FREEWRTING

Try freewriting as a way to speed up your writing and prepare for exams. Freewriting is a form of timed writing that helps you turn off your “inner editor”.

Decide on a topic you will write about, and set a timer for 5 minutes. For that 5 minutes, keep your pen moving continuously on the page.

Do not stop to think of a word. Do not stop when you run out of ideas. Do not pause to edit or correct mistakes. Just keep writing as quickly as possible.

Doing freewriting regularly helps you feel more confident about writing even when you think you have no ideas. And, since writing is directly connected to thinking, people who use freewriting often have more ideas to write about!

PLANNING DURING YOUR EXAM

Take a few minutes at the start of the exam to read through the whole exam and plan how you will write it. The biggest mistake people make in essay exams is that they start writing as soon as they open the exam booklet.

STRATEGIES

1. Look at the marks assigned to each question before you start writing. Divide your available time by the relative value of the exam questions. Spend more time on the questions that are worth more marks.

2. Do the easiest questions first (if the exam allows you to). Successfully completing one question builds your confidence for tackling more difficult ones.

3. Take the time to carefully read and make notes on the essay question or topic. There are often keywords that you can use to brainstorm and organize your answer.

For example, an exam may ask you to agree or disagree with a statement. Your thesis statement will then take a position on one side or the other.

Consider the six W's when looking at the question: the *who, what, where, when, why, and how* of the statement. Your supporting points will then provide evidence in favour of your argument.

METHODS FOR WRITING ESSAY EXAMS

BRAINSTORM

Even when you have only a short time to write an entire essay, always take a few minutes before you start writing to note everything you can think of about the subject.

You might write a list of topics, themes or keywords you discussed in class; a list of texts you can reference; and/or a list of images or other resources related to the essay. These rough notes can help if you get stuck during your writing.

OUTLINE SKETCH

As part of your planning, sketch a rough outline, including an argument, before you start writing. It can be very simple. If you have an outline, it will be easier for you to stay focused on your argument.

As a bonus, if you run out of time to write your full essay, your instructor will be able to see what your intentions were.

SIMPLICITY

Stick to a simple essay form. A very short introduction (1-2 sentences will usually suffice) with your answer to the essay question, one paragraph per supporting point, and a very short conclusion. You won't have time to get creative, so make it as easy as possible for your instructor to find and understand your main ideas.

CLARITY OVER COMPLEXITY

Write quickly and simply. Getting your ideas across clearly is more important than making your sentences sound complex or "academic". Your instructors understand that you do not have as much time to wordsmith as you would on a take-home essay.

REVIEW + REVISE

Always leave a few minutes at the end of your exam to review your essay. Watch for repetition, missing words, or places where you've gone off topic.

Good luck!