Many tests will require you to write a timed essay. You may feel panicked at the idea of having to produce a high-quality essay under a tight time constraint. But you can relax: this video shows you four basic steps to follow so that you can write a great essay quickly.

How to Write a Great Essay Quickly

If you’re anything like me, you get stressed when you feel rushed. Sometimes when I feel that I don’t have enough time to get something done, I get so frantic that I end up not being able to do anything right. Just last week, I had to get my two young kids to their swim lesson. We were running late, and all I could think about was the lesson was the clock. Distracted, I ended up missing the right intersection and having to drive far out of our way. Then, as I scrambled to get everyone out of the van, I completely forgot to close the back passenger side door. I left it standing wide open when we went inside. By the end of the day, I felt lucky just to have gotten the right two kids out of the pool and back to the house. If I’d just stopped panicking about the time and paid attention to where I was heading, things would have gone a bit more smoothly.

That awful, rushed feeling also applies in other settings, of course. One of the toughest things about writing a timed essay is the panic we can feel once the minutes start to tick away. And that panicky feeling can wreak real havoc on the quality of what we write. But there’s good news: there are four basic steps that can put you on the right track to put together a great essay even in a tight time crunch, all while keeping your cool.

1. Make Sure That You Understand the Question

First, read and reread the essay prompt a few times before you start to write. Make sure you have a good, clear understanding of what you’re being asked. You might think that one quick read-through is enough, but the trouble is that once the clock starts to tick, you might find yourself writing and writing and writing to beat the clock, only to stop and realize that you have gone off on quite a tangent, not really doing what the essay prompt has asked you to do. And when that happens, there may not be enough time to fix it.

So, as you read the essay prompt, really pay attention to what it’s asking. For example, if you are presented with a position statement and you’re asked to provide your opinion on the expressed position, be sure that you’re clear on what you need to write about. Does the prompt ask you whether you completely support or oppose the stated position? Or does it ask to what degree you support or oppose it? Keep in mind that you might be asked not just for a black or white answer but for a shade of gray. You might also be asked, for example, whether the stated position has some merit, even if you don’t completely agree with it.

By reading and rereading the essay question, you can avoid running into the problem of finding yourself going down the wrong path with only a few minutes to course-correct before time is called for your essay.

For example, imagine that you’ve been asked to write an essay dealing with the topic of whether cities should put legal limits on the size of sugary sodas that restaurants and concession stands can serve. Imagine also that you have opinion pieces presented by writers on both sides of the issue. Before you jump in and begin writing your impassioned argument explaining why such legal limits should or shouldn’t be put in place, stop and take a minute to go back through the question. Are you being asked to write a persuasive essay in favor of or against the institution of size restrictions on sodas? Or are you perhaps being asked to put together a thoughtful analysis of the strong points presented by both sides?

You might end up writing a brilliant, convincing essay, but if you’re not really answering the question that was presented, you’ll end up with a problem. So remember to reread the question first thing.

2. Quickly Outline Your Major Points

Second, you should outline your major points before you begin writing your essay. When you were in junior high, you may have been required to turn in formal outlines with papers that you submitted for a grade.

That extra step, with all of the Roman numerals and letters and indentations, may have seemed like a real pain at the time - just a lot of extra work. But taking the time to sketch out an outline of your major points when you’re writing under time constraints can be invaluable. Luckily, you don’t have to do anything formal when you’re trying to write an essay quickly. Just jot down some points in the order you think that they should be made. No Roman numerals are required; you can just use bullet points if you’d like.

Let’s go back to our soda law example. If you’ve been asked to put together an argument about whether or not cities should place legal limits on the size of sugary sodas that restaurants and concession stands can serve, you should first sketch out a few major, distinct points that you want to make. If you’re using the five-paragraph essay structure, it would make sense to make three major points, for example.

You should pull the strongest points that you find from sources that you have in favor of soda size limits and devote roughly the same amount of space to each one. You’ve got to remember, too, to address the major points brought up by the proponents of the position that you disagree with, so you might devote a paragraph arguing that the size limit would help combat the obesity epidemic present in many cities and a second body paragraph comparing the size limit to accepted smoking restrictions. You could then use a third body paragraph to note that opponents of the size limit law claim that the limit places unfair burdens on business. You could counter that because there is no outright ban on sugary sodas, any burdens on business are not unreasonable.

By sketching all of this out in outline form - along with some supporting details - before you write your actual essay, you’ll have an organized roadmap for where you want to go so you won’t get lost or encounter any unexpected detours along the way. You can be sure when you start writing the actual essay that your ideas are all on-point.

3. Write Your Introduction and Conclusion Last

Third, try writing your introductory paragraph and then your concluding paragraph after you’ve written the middle, body paragraphs of your essay. Honestly, this is a useful tip even when you have all the time in the world to finish your essay. While we may feel the need to write the first paragraph first, and then the second, then the third, and so on, it can actually be a good idea to hold off on your intro paragraph until after you’ve already written the body of your essay. You can then know with confidence exactly what it is that you’ll be introducing.
You're no doubt familiar with the term forecast from weather reports, when the weather person predicts what weather lies ahead. In a good introduction to any essay, you should also forecast for your reader the major points that you'll be making. This is a lot easier to do when you've already made your points. You can simply tick off for the reader in your intro paragraph the major points that you've covered in the body of your essay and in what order you've covered them. Similarly, in your concluding paragraph, you can just sum up the major points that you've made throughout your essay and restate your thesis.

4. Save Time to Edit Your Essay

Fourth, be sure to edit your essay. No matter how tight your timeline is when writing an essay, it's crucial that you set aside a little time to read through your work and correct any mistakes. As you read back through your essay, in addition to checking for spelling, grammar, and sentence structure mistakes, you should check for one other major thing: does each paragraph serve a clear function that supports the thesis of your essay?

If any paragraph seems a bit muddled, work on clarifying your topic sentence or transitional sentence for that paragraph or add an additional short detail or example. Quick tweaks like that can help shore up a paragraph that might otherwise seem a bit off-track or unclear.

Summary

Most of us will have to write an essay under a tight time constraint at some point. But just because you write your essay quickly doesn't mean it can't be great. Remember, don't let that panicky feeling distract you. Be sure to read and reread the question carefully and ensure that you understand it before you start writing. Remember to quickly outline the major points that you want to make; this will help keep you on track. Then, write your introductory and concluding paragraphs last, after your body paragraphs, in order to make them apply better to what you've written. And finally, give yourself a bit of time to edit for grammar and content. If you've followed all the other steps, you shouldn't have too many content problems you'll have to fix.

Just like when you're trying to get somewhere in a hurry, if you keep your cool, you stay focused on where you're headed, and you're methodical about how you get there, your quick essay will also be a great one.

11/30/2012

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