

Timed Writing

While college students write in various genres for various purposes, one particular genre that vexes many students is the timed essay. Because of the pressure it brings, writing in a timed setting can cause even the most confident writer to feel anxious, to become stumped while writing, and to question her/his final work. Although timed essays will vary in their content, purpose, and audience, there are certain strategies that can be utilized in almost any situation to make your writing more productive and meaningful.

Read Strategically

The timed essay can also be considered a response essay because most timed essays correspond to some type of text. However, some students, believing that there is not enough time to read carefully, skim through the reading component without fully comprehending its content or overall message. Unfortunately, this practice is extremely counterproductive, as not comprehending a text you are expected to write a response to often results in a weak essay. To get the most of a text while reading, make sure to incorporate the following activities:

Read the title of the text.

It might sound obvious, but many students forgo this step entirely, even though it can only enhance reading comprehension. Most authors are very strategic when titling their work and choose titles with significance. Therefore, reading the title can give you various clues as to what the text is about or even offer insight as to what the author's main argument is going to be. You may also want to reread the title after reading the entire text and consider how they are related.

Annotate the text.

When reading a text you are expected to write a response to, even if it is a text you have read before, annotating can greatly aid your comprehension, help you remember key points and save time during the writing process. Some ways to annotate a text are:

- Highlighting or underlining the author's primary claim or main argument
- Highlighting or underlining key words or phrases used by the author
- Highlighting or underlining significant passages that you may want to reference in your essay
- Labeling the topic or focus of each paragraph so as to be aware of the text's structure

Read the writing task and keep it in mind while composing your essay.

Are you being asked to respond to a specific claim that the author makes or are you being asked to connect the topic to your own personal experiences? It is important to know exactly what is required of you before you begin writing. Even if you produce a

thoughtful, error-free essay, but do not respond to the writing task, you most likely will not receive a passing grade.

Make a Plan

After familiarizing, or re-familiarizing, yourself with the reading to which your timed essay will respond and reflecting on the topic, it is helpful to create a brief outline or plan for your essay. Because of time constraints, it is not necessary to write a formal or lengthy outline—rather, it is more important to think about the most important components of your essay. Your outline can simply answer the following questions:

- How will you begin and end your essay?
- What will your thesis statement be?
- What will each body paragraph be about?
- What order will your body paragraphs go in?

Create a rough skeleton of your essay that includes this information. An outline, even an informal one, will save you time as you write and keep you focused. However, keep in mind that for an outline to be useful, it must be utilized—don't forget to periodically refer back to your outline while writing so that you stay on track.

Go Back to Basics

You may think that, in college, it is not acceptable to write the same way you may have written when you first learned how to write in an academic setting. That is, a five-paragraph essay with simple sentence structure and vocabulary. However, when composing in the genre of the timed essay, it's acceptable, and encouraged, to fall back on basic writing tools. Keep in mind, though, this does not mean your essay should have no substance; you have matured as a writer and your writing should reflect that. While you can keep your structure simple for time's sake, do not sacrifice your content. Here are some writing basics which can save you time:

Accessible vocabulary

While you may be eager to use complex vocabulary that will impress your instructor, do not use any words that you are unsure of. When you're composing an essay at home, you have time to double-check a word's proper use, spelling, or definition; when writing in a timed setting, it's best to go with words you are thoroughly familiar with. Also, be cautious when using class terms in your essay; using a subject-specific term incorrectly will not look favorable.

Simple sentence structure

One-draft essays, such as the timed essay, often read like a stream of consciousness or one continuous thought. As a result, many timed essays contain run-on sentences. As

with vocabulary, when you are writing an essay that can be revised, you have more time to experiment with more complex sentences; however, in a timed setting, it is best to keep your sentences clear and concise. When in doubt, use the simple sentence structure: subject + verb. While you can, and should, vary your sentence length and structure, the simple sentence structure is useful if you find yourself spending too much time on a particular sentence.

The five paragraph model

Many college students are told to abandon the five-paragraph model altogether. The truth is, it can be useful in certain situations, such as timed settings. It is particularly useful for students who struggle with organization or run out of time when composing a timed essay. Here is a suggested outline for your timed essay:

Introduction

- Briefly summarize the reading, including the title of the reading, the author's name, and main points.
- State your thesis. Note: this should respond directly to the writing task.

Body paragraphs

- Stick to one topic per paragraph. Make sure to reference the reading or quote from the reading in each paragraph. Always connect your body paragraphs to your thesis statement.

Conclusion

- Briefly reinforce your primary argument or reflect on the topic. Conclusions can also look ahead and make predictions about the topic.

Engage Critically with the Topic

Perhaps you read the corresponding text carefully and fully understood its content. Perhaps your essay had a sound structure and was free of any major mechanical errors. However, you still received a lower grade than you hoped for. What could have gone wrong, you wonder? The most essential component of a successful timed essay is also the most difficult to teach and to learn: engagement with the topic. Many timed essays are underdeveloped—that is, they do not display deep critical thinking or exploration of the proposed topic.

If the topic is something that was previously covered or discussed in class (for instance, a comparison of two novels that were read), your professor will undoubtedly expect you to fully engage with the topic, as you have had ample time to reflect. If the topic is given to you on the spot (as with assessments or some exams), you are still expected to write a thoughtful essay. Here are some ways you can demonstrate a critical examination of the topic:

Do not invent knowledge of or a connection to the topic

Some people may advise you to just make something up if you are unsure of how to respond to a text. However, this often results in superficial writing and will still signal to the reader that your essay is underdeveloped. Acknowledging your limited expertise is permissible, so long as you do not use it to justify an underdeveloped essay.

Think about the topic in a broader sense

There are a number of ways to discuss a topic you are unfamiliar with. Consider some of the questions below:

- How does the topic connect to your community or environment?
- What is your initial response to the topic?
- What are the pros and cons of the topic?
- What is a possible counter argument to the text?

It is important to widen your scope and to not simply think of how you personally relate to the topic. Critical thinking means examining all sides of an issue or topic, not just what is immediately presented to us. Demonstrating that you can critically think about and fruitfully discuss a topic, especially one you were previously unfamiliar with, is the mark of an academic and is what is expected of most higher education students.

Proofread

Last but certainly not least, remember that no matter how rushed you may feel, you should always take a few minutes to proofread your essay before submitting it. Instructors tend to be more forgiving about minor errors on timed essays, but that still does not mean they will consider a completely unpolished essay acceptable. Look for sentence clarity, cohesion between paragraphs, and major grammar or spelling errors. It may also help to read your essay quietly to yourself once through. If you decide to make some last-minute changes or to correct some errors, do so neatly so that your essay is still comprehensive.