

# Tips to Improve In-Class Essay Writing

## **Preparing for the Exam**

The best way to prepare is to ***write outlines*** on topics that might appear on the essay exam, and then do a free-write draft for each outline. This practice will give you something familiar or comfortable to work with on exam day and will also help you to retain the material studied. Hopefully, this practice will also reduce some of the tension and anxiety that usually accompanies exams.

Get plenty of sleep the night before the exam and eat properly on the day of the exam. You don't want to arrive to your exam either too hungry or too full. Also, wear something comfortable that is not too warm or too cool, layering is best so you can add or take away clothes to adjust to a good temperature. Be sure to arrive early and prepared with everything you need, pencil, pen, paper, etc. And finally, remember to breathe!

## **Read the Instructions Carefully**

Many times students do poorly on a test because they fail to read the questions or directions carefully. If you are asked to define or identify, do not evaluate. Instead, give a clear, concise, and accurate definition or identification. If asked to explain, demonstrate that you have some depth of understanding about the subject. If the exam has two or more questions, read them all at the beginning of the testing period. If you have a choice, select questions that you can write about most completely within the time limit.

## **Plan Your Answers**

Decide how much time you will have to answer each question. Plan to spend less time on questions that you cannot answer well or questions that count less toward your total score. Before you begin, take a few minutes to brainstorm and jot down main ideas. Then, develop a thesis and a working outline for each answer and see that each point answers the question. Be sure to save enough time to reread, revise, and edit your answers. If you find yourself running out of time, outline the answer that you do not have time to write out completely.

## **State Points Clearly**

Write an introduction that ends with a thesis. Use transitional expressions to show how ideas are related, and use topic sentences to indicate that your paragraphs are about. Develop each paragraph to support its topic sentence. Be sure that each topic sentence supports your main idea or thesis. Finally, write a conclusion that logically follows from your thesis and serves to bring your discussion to an end.

## Stick to the Topic

Be sure to stick to the topic by answering the question asked. One strategy you might use to keep from going off the topic is to respond to cue words. Here is a list of cue words found in questions for essay tests:

- **Analyze**- to separate something into parts and then discuss those parts and their meanings.
- **Classify**- to arrange into groups on the basis of shared characteristics.
- **Compare and contrast**- to show similarities and their differences.
- **Criticize**- to judge and discuss the merits and faults of your subject.
- **Define**- to explain or identify the nature or essential qualities of your subject.
- **Discuss**- to consider or examine by argument, comment or debate, or to explore solutions.
- **Evaluate**- to appraise the worth of an idea, comment, etc. and justify your conclusion.
- **Explain**- to make clear or intelligible something that needs to be understood or interpreted.
- **Illustrate**- to use specific examples or analogies to clarify or explain something.
- **Interpret**- to define information through an explanation based on personal opinion.
- **Justify**- showing or proving that something is valid or correct.
- **Prove**- to present evidence that cannot be refuted logically or with other evidence.
- **Relate**- to show the connections between two or more things.
- **Review**- to reexamine, summarize, or reprise something.
- **Summarize**- to briefly repeat the major points of something.
- **Support**- to argue in favor of something.

## Revise and Proofread

Plan to budget your time so you can go over your essay slowly. Your spelling, punctuation, grammar and any careless omissions need to be checked carefully. Also, make sure your meaning is clear and relevant to the questions and that all corrections and revisions are legible. Some important questions to ask are:

- Have you supported your thesis?
- Do your paragraphs follow your topic sentences?
- Have you used strong transitions?
- Have you maintained a consistent verb tense throughout your paper?
- Are there any spelling errors?
- Are there any sentence fragments or comma splices?