

Writing timed essay can be daunting, but practicing the following strategies can help increase your confidence and prepare you for the challenge.

Before the Exam

Most exam companies and many instructors provide sample questions, assessment guidelines, and even examples of effective essays. Use these tools to study and to practice writing full essay responses and essay outlines. Practice under the same time constraints you can expect on exam day.

Understand the Prompt

When reading the prompt or question, underline or circle key words to help you understand exactly what is being asked. These key words will dictate the content and organization of your essay. Below are some common keywords:

Compare	Discuss similarities.
Contrast	Discuss differences.
Criticize	Discuss advantages and disadvantages.
Define	Explain the meaning. Describe the purpose, nature, and scope of a concept.
Discuss	Give pro and con evidence that describes the relative strengths and weaknesses.
Explain	Describe the topic or concept's reasons or causes, logical development, or significance.
Illustrate	Give concrete examples.
Interpret	Write statements which clarify the meaning you find in the ideas or evidence.
Justify	Give reasons why an act, a judgment, a behavior, etc., is rational or significant.
List	Write a number of features, events, actions, characteristics, etc.

Gauge Your Time

Prioritize writing tasks. Spend the most time on essays worth the most points. Distribute your time within each response. For example, if you have 30 minutes to write, you could spend 5 minutes organizing, 20 minutes writing, and 5 minutes revising. Be aware of the clock to keep yourself on schedule.

Write Your Essay

Organizing

An organizational plan will help you write with more confidence and clarity. For longer essays, outline a list of points you wish to cover, noting the evidence you will use or counterarguments you may address. However, given the time constraints, spend no more than five minutes on this task.

Writing

Write a guiding statement or thesis that fully addresses the prompt. Instead of focusing on creating a catchy opening statement, concentrate on clearly stating your main ideas and supporting them.

Write clear, well-structured paragraphs that focus on one idea and connect back to your guiding statement or thesis. Support your ideas with concrete evidence: examples, facts, quotes, explanations, analysis, etc. Use topic sentences and transitions between ideas to emphasize your main points.

Write as much as you can about the relevant points, but avoid adding irrelevant and distracting details just to increase length. Remember, the reader is checking for your understanding of content and language in addition to assessing your ability to think critically and write an essay of a sufficient length within the time allotted.

Revising

Leave time, at least five minutes, to review and revise your work. Make sure you have fulfilled the assignment and organized your ideas. Check for clarity. Check your grammar, spelling, and punctuation.