



## Writing Under Pressure: Short Answer and Essay Questions

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Timed writing situations, such as those you face on an examination that includes short answer and/or essay questions, present a writer with unique challenges.

But it's also possible to use the same strategies you use for outside-of-class writing assignments to help you prepare for and respond to short-answer and essay questions.

There is no substitute for knowing your material well. So allow plenty of time to review the material in the week preceding the examination. Underline key points and jot down important ideas, dates, concepts, and facts. Even if you are not permitted to use your notes to take the exam, the act of writing them down will help you remember them.

It's helpful to have a set process to follow when you respond to short-answer and essay questions. Here is one such process, based in part on "Writing Under Pressure" (from *The Prentice Hall Guide for College Writers*) and also on my own experience.

### Tips for Responding to Short-Answer and Essay Questions

- Relax. Take several deep breaths.
  - The calmer you are, the more you will remember. And panic is an awful enemy. It clouds your mind and robs you of confidence.
- Budget your time.
  - If you are taking a two-hour exam and there are two parts, one a 30-question, multiple-choice segment worth 90 points and the other a 6-question, short essay answer segment, also worth 90 points, then you should plan to complete the essay question in about an hour.
  - You may even want to consider doing the short answer questions first. The point is, you should budget your time in a way that makes sense given the number of short-answer or essay questions, their weight on the exam, and the total amount of time you have to complete the examination.
- Read the question carefully. Then read it again.
  - Pay attention to the verbs used in the question: often they give you a clue as to how to respond. If the question asks you to *list* the most important events leading up to World War II, you will need a very different type of answer than you would need if the question asked you to *analyze* the events leading up to the war.
- Compose your thoughts.

- Make a “sketch outline” or information map of your answer. Rephrase the question into an introductory statement for your response and list your ideas beneath it. There’s no wrong to do this stage, but you should choose a method that works for you.
- Review your outline to be sure you are answering the question.
  - It would surprise you to know how many students work very hard to compose responses which do not come near to answering the question. If you determine that your initial efforts are off-target early in the process, you will still have time to make corrections. If you wait until you are almost done with your answer, you will not have time to do anything about it.
- Stick to the point
  - The best reason to have an outline is to keep your self on target. It’s very easy to wander off your subject – remember that the reader will be just as pressed for time as you are and won’t be willing to follow the scenic route. Stick to the main trail.
- Include plenty of specific details and examples.
  - Support every general statement with at least one specific detail or example. Nothing shows your understanding of the material better than specific references.
- Write a good conclusion
  - Another common mistake is to write right up to the ending of the examination period, leaving no time to write a conclusion or proofread. An answer that ends in mid-thought is unlikely to earn you full credit, so it’s important to save time to write a conclusion that summarizes your main point and provides closure.
  - *Hint.* When instructors are pressed for time, they may even read the introduction to an answer, skim the middle, and read the conclusion carefully. It pays to have a good conclusion.
- Read over your answer before you turn it in
  - This final stage takes discipline. By the time you finish writing, you’re tired and pretty bored with the question and your response. But re-reading your work one last time gives you another opportunity to correct errors in fact, misspellings, or other mistakes which might lead your reader to judge your answer harshly.

## References and Resources

Reid, Stephen P. *Prentice Hall Guide for College Writers*. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003). Print.

“Taking Essay Exams.” *Center for Academic Success*. n.d. University of Alabama.



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