

## **Week Fourteen: Writing timed essay exams**

### **Introduction: Why a timed essay exam in a course that has focused on drafting and revising extended papers?**

During your college career, it is likely that you'll be asked to produce three different kinds of writing: essays, research papers, and in-class exams. (If you are in the sciences, you'll also be required to produce lab reports.) In the course you're completing, you've focused on writing essays and, if you've gotten the hang of this, you've also begun to ask the kind of questions that require additional research and more room to discuss your ideas. While the connection between writing essays and writing research papers may seem pretty straightforward, it may not be so obvious how practicing this kind of writing helps prepare you for writing under completely different conditions—by hand, in a room filled with other students, and for a clearly specified amount of time.

To be honest, the timed essay is a mode of writing that is peculiar to the academy: nowhere else will you be “asked” to sit down and write out your response on the spot to a question that someone has just put to you. Whatever one may think about the lasting value of such writing, it is simply a fact that success in school depends upon developing the ability to produce writing that is well organized and well thought out under timed conditions. And it is for this reason that we conclude our course with a timed final exam.

We believe that your work in this course has provided you with the skills required to write well under these conditions: we believe that, by the end of this course, you should be able to generate essays that work with the assigned materials to establish your position on a given issue and that you should be able to do so in prose that is well-organized and relatively free of errors. We also believe that, by this point in the semester, you should be able to predict with some accuracy what kind of question will serve as your writing prompt. With these skills at your disposal, you should be able to write enough in the time required to establish that you can present an intelligent, reflective response to the kinds of questions that are used to prompt in-class essays.

### **Preparing for the exam**

#### **Thinking about what your teacher wants you to do**

“What is my teacher looking for?” This is the question that is foremost on students' minds during exam period. The problem with this question is that it can lead one to think that what is required to prepare for essay exams is the power to read minds! We think a better question is this one: “What is it that my teacher wants to see me be able to do with the assigned materials?” Asking the question in this way focuses attention on the skills you've acquired and perfected over the semester. These skills include:

1. Developing a position that responds to the assignment question
2. Identifying key ideas from the essays to support that position
3. Organizing your thoughts so that they are in conversation with two or more texts
4. Choosing appropriate evidence to clarify your position

5. Establishing how your evidence led you to your position
6. Creating relationship between ideas across paragraphs through the use of transitions
7. Proofreading to bring grammatical and syntactical errors under control

You've spent the past fourteen weeks developing these skills: the in-class exam provides a forum where you can demonstrate that you can call on these skills when you are working under timed conditions.

### **Planning ahead: Predicting the question**

What is the question that your teacher is likely to ask you on exam day?

By this point in the semester, you should be able to predict what *kind* of question your teacher is going to put before you. The point of this exam—and the point of any exam—is for you to establish that you've mastered the content of the course and that you can not only repeat what you've learned, but that you can also demonstrate that you can think *about* and *with* the ideas that were at the center of the course. In a writing course, you show that you've mastered the content by demonstrating that you can do what has been stressed throughout the semester: using the assigned materials to make connections and then to reflect on the significance of those connections. That's it.

So, no matter *what* question gets put in front of you on exam day, the goal of the exam is to give you the opportunity to show that what you can do with what you've read, heard, and thought about all semester long.

### **Reviewing**

If you think of your exam as a regular paper assignment in miniature, then you can prepare for your exam by using many of the same pre-writing techniques you employed when writing your papers during the semester.

1. Review your notes on the essays you read during the semester. On a separate sheet of paper, make a list of the key ideas that appear in the essays. Note the passages in the essays that provide evidence for these ideas.
2. Read the new essay that has been assigned for the exam and make a list of its key ideas and passages.
3. Make connections among the essays based on your lists and the new reading. Identify the 2 or 3 previous readings that provide the most connections to your new reading and review them in detail.
4. Highlight passages within the texts that you think would be most useful.
5. Cross-reference passages from different essays so you don't have to waste time looking for the citations during the exam. You can do this by writing in the margins of your book one- or two-word key concepts from other essays that could apply to highlighted passages.

## During the exam

1. Read the exam question carefully. Identify the key parts of the assignment. Briefly re-write the question in your own terms to make sure that you understand it.
2. Use scrap paper or the inside cover of your exam booklet to write down a plan for your essay. Make notes on a position statement and then briefly outline the 2-3 points you want to make. Remember, your essay does not need to be as long as the ones you've produced in response to regular paper assignments. Concentrate on just a few ideas, but make your discussion of those ideas as detailed as possible.
3. Look up significant passages in your book and write down the page numbers and first few words in your outline. This will save time later on; you won't have to stop and search for a passage once you've begun to write.
4. Pace yourself. Use only the first 10-15 minutes of the exam period for planning your essay—then start to write, even if your plan is incomplete. Estimate the time it will take to write each paragraph and try to stick to that timetable.
5. Make sure to leave about 10 minutes at the end of the exam session to reread your essay. Edit any confusing sentences, add to paragraphs that need more explanation, and correct any grammatical errors.

## Summary

Think of your exam as a regular paper assignment in miniature. The key to doing well is to show what you can *do* with what you've read. What connections can you make? What position follows from these connections? Why is it important to consider this position? Those are the questions that are at the center of your writing course and they are the questions that your instructor will be looking for you to answer in your final essay exam.