

Guide to Writing In-Class Essays

1. Come into the test with a **watch or clock** so that you can keep track of how much time you have to complete the exam. Don't rely on the instructor to keep time for you, or depend on a clock being present in the testing room.
2. If you are allowed to use notes or texts during the test, **make annotations, margin notes, and quick reference signs (stars, underlining) before the test**. This will help you find what you're looking for during the test without wasting time.
3. **Read all of the instructions carefully**. You may not need to answer every question, or you may need to answer in a certain way. Ask your instructor if you're unclear on anything.
4. **Pick out the key terms** in the questions. Common key terms include:
 - **Analyze**: Describe each part of the subject and show how the parts relate to each other and to the whole.
 - **Argue**: Give your perspective and support it with evidence.
 - **Compare**: Describe the object, person, or idea and show how they are similar.
 - **Contrast**: Describe the object, person, or idea and show how they are different.
 - **Define**: Give the details that separates the subject from similar items.
 - **Describe**: Give details about the person, object, or idea.
 - **Discuss**: This general term usually means to analyze, illustrate, and argue.
 - **Explain**: Like discuss, this term also usually means to define, analyze, and illustrate.
 - **Evaluate**: Examine the good and bad points and form an overall judgment.
 - **Illustrate**: Use examples to describe and analyze.
 - **Narrate**: Give details about the sequence of events.
 - **Outline**: List the main ideas and the major details within each idea.
 - **Summarize**: Select the main points and briefly describe them.
 - **Trace**: Starting with the earliest point, describe the subject's progression.
5. Don't skip directions that ask you to **use examples, tell why, or offer support**. These are usually key parts of the question; in other words, they're usually going to be worth a lot of the question's points.
6. Before you write anything down, **look over the entire test**. Assigned point values are typically clues for how detailed the instructor expects your answer to be—don't spend more time than necessary on one question, and you may wish to answer questions with the highest point value first. Common types of written questions include:
 - **Identification**: Typically, 1-3 sentences defining an object, person, event, or idea.
 - **Short Answer**: Usually about the length of a paragraph answering a specific question and supported by examples.
 - **Essay**: Multiple pages of writing, divided into paragraphs and supporting a main point (thesis statement).

If an identification is worth 5 points and an essay is worth 20 points, your instructor is probably expecting four times as much length, information, and support, and to spend four times as long, on the essay.

7. **Make notes on the test or scrap paper.** Jot down whatever will help you remember your ideas so that you will have something written down to refer to if you get stuck later on. Remember, these notes are only for you, so they don't have to make sense to anyone else.
8. Even if you feel rushed, take a moment to stop and organize your thoughts. For essay questions, **write a rough outline** that makes sense to you. **Write a thesis statement** — one sentence which sums up your main response to the question. This statement should be clear, direct, and should repeat some of the question's wording. Most instructors do not expect in-class essays to be as coherent and thought-out as a revised out-of-class paper, but you will receive better marks if your essay is organized and has a clear main point. When you're trying to create your thesis statement, use the essay question as a starting point—repeat some of the question's wording. Also, reread the question often as you're writing just to make sure you're staying on track.
9. Leave time to **read back through your work**. Unless you're told otherwise, it is perfectly acceptable to cross things out, add words in the margin, and even sentences—so long as the essay is still legible.
10. **Remember to breathe.** Don't panic. If you feel yourself starting to panic, close your eyes and take a deep breath. The goal is to get your point across to your instructor. Think of it as writing to an individual and focus on getting your ideas across to that one person.