

# Tackling Timed Writing

Writing a timed essay in class can be very intimidating. However, understanding how to prepare for the experience and how to answer the questions should help you perform better on timed exams. It is important to be prepared, to read the question carefully, and to budget your time.

## Purpose of Timed Writing

The point of a timed, written exam (and most exams) is for you to show that you have mastered the course material; instead of repeating what you know, think about the ideas that are at the center of the course. Overall, the key is to show what you can do with the course material. If you are nervous about the idea of a timed, essay exam, then perhaps you should think of it as a mini-version of a regular paper; you will use many of the prewriting techniques from your writing courses.

## Preparation

**Create mock questions:** Like research papers, preparation is crucial for timed, writing assignments. The more work done beforehand, the easier the task will be. If your instructor does not give you a set of questions or a study guide, you can still prepare. For instance, try to think what kind of questions you would ask if you were the instructor. Read over class notes and use your textbook to develop questions that you can answer for practice. By preparing ahead of time, you will have a better idea what to expect and how to respond.

**Outline your answers:** Once you have some sample questions, take a couple of minutes to think about your answer. Then, sketch an outline in the margins of your paper. This way, you not only formulate a coherent answer, but you will also be less likely to forget to answer a part of the question.

## Tips for Timed Writing

Writing a timed essay is similar to writing one outside of class, with the exception of the time limit. If you prepare to write in class just as you would outside class, you will do better.

DO	AVOID
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Prepare:</b> outline key course topics, write mock exams at home (most textbooks include practice writing prompts).</li><li>• <b>Read</b> the question carefully several times; make sure you understand it.</li><li>• Write a <b>well-focused</b> answer: answer in the correct context.</li><li>• Write a <b>well-organized</b> answer: outline key points on your blue book cover or on scratch paper.</li><li>• Write a <b>well-supported</b> answer: use facts, examples, and information to justify and prove your answer.</li><li>• <b>Answer all parts of all questions.</b></li><li>• <b>Budget your time:</b> leave time to answer all questions completely and to proofread.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Cramming (studying at the last minute).</li><li>• Skimming the question(s) and immediately beginning to write.</li><li>• Fluff: don't pad your answer and hope it will address the question.</li><li>• Stream of consciousness writing.</li><li>• Stating conclusions with no evidence.</li><li>• Simply summarizing course material.</li></ul>

## Writing

**Budget your time.** Even though you are dealing with a time limit, you want to leave time for outlining and proofreading your essay. Allowing yourself time to outline will help you answer questions clearly and concisely. For example, if your class is 50 minutes, your writing schedule might look like this: 10 minutes for outlining, 30 minutes for writing, and 10 minutes for editing and proofreading. You won't have time to add superfluous information; stick to your outline. Stay on task, and you should be able to complete the assignment in the allotted time.

## Timed-Writing Questions: Terms

Understanding the question is essential to doing well on the exam. You should read the question(s) carefully several times to make sure you understand. If anything is unclear, ask your instructor about it as soon as possible.

Questions can be broken into two categories: information only and application. **Information only** terms mean that the instructor is looking simply for a list of facts from course material, and not any explanation. **Application** terms imply that the instructor wants students to apply the facts learned in the course to make larger connections. Most timed writing will use application terms.

It is imperative that you understand which type of question you are being asked, or you will not be able to answer correctly. Sometimes, a question may begin by asking only for information, but in another part, it will ask the student to apply that knowledge. **Read carefully!**

### Common Terms That Often Confuse Writers (Source: *The Little, Brown Handbook 145*)

Application Terms	Information Only Terms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Analyze:</b> take apart and question, argue with.</li><li>• <b>Argue:</b> persuade using evidence and logic.</li><li>• <b>Compare and contrast:</b> similarities and differences and significance of them.</li><li>• <b>Discuss:</b> talk about the significance.</li><li>• <b>Effects:</b> discuss the causes and consequences.</li><li>• <b>Evaluate:</b> critique, assess.</li><li>• <b>Explain:</b> give details and their relevance.</li><li>• <b>Respond:</b> usually your opinion or interpretation.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Define:</b> give the definition.</li><li>• <b>Inform:</b> give relevant data and facts.</li><li>• <b>List:</b> list related information.</li><li>• <b>Summarize:</b> in your own words, shorter than the original, complete objective.</li></ul>

### Some Other Tips for Timed Writing

- **Arrive five minutes early to the class.** This will give you time to relax before you start to write.
- **Wear a watch.** This will help you budget your time if there is no clock in your classroom.
- **Remain calm.** If you get nervous or feel stuck, remember that you can do this! Take a deep breath and start again.
- **Have a conclusion** even if you are running out of time.
- **Don't erase. Just cross out mistakes.**

**The keys to successful timed writing:  
prepare, understand the question, organize your ideas, and budget your time.**