Timed Essay Writing

1. Pre-Planning

Read the questions and passages carefully. Make sure you understand what you are being asked to do: summarize, analyze, or argue. Think about what you want to say and the time you are being given to say it, and schedule your time accordingly.

2. Planning

Resist the urge to start writing without first doing some planning. Trying to write an essay before you’ve figured out what you want to say can waste a lot of time. Before you start writing, take a few minutes to create a rough outline, do some free writing, listing, brainstorming, or whatever helps you organize your thoughts.

For a timed essay, an outline can be particularly useful as a time saving strategy. First determine what your answer to the question is, then decide what your main three supporting arguments are, and lastly, provide supporting evidence and examples. For example:

Question: Do you think post-secondary education is important?

Your Answer: Yes, I believe post-secondary education is important. (This is the first part of your thesis statement)

Question: Why do you believe post-secondary education is important? (This is the second part of your thesis statement)

Three Main Supporting Arguments: It helps you get a job, it teaches critical thinking and broadens your horizons.

Question: How does post-secondary education help you get a job, teach critical thinking, and broaden your horizons?

Your Answer: Post-secondary education is often a requirement for specific skills-based jobs like Communications, Engineering, and Policy. It teaches you critical thinking by asking you to analyze the information you’re given, often by writing essays. It also broadens your horizons because you often have to take classes outside of your major in order to graduate, like Art History, Languages, Math and Science.

If you have specific examples/experiences/anecdotes you can include, that provides even more evidence of support and strengthens your argument.
3. **Write a Thesis Statement**

It’s important to clearly state your main points in a sentence or two at the beginning of the essay. If you have problems writing a clear thesis statement that probably means you haven’t yet decided what you want to say and more planning is needed.

**Things to consider when developing a thesis statement:**

- Focus it on the topic.
- It is an argument, not a statement of fact.
- It is a statement, not a question.
- Use it to answer a question: why or how?
- It should reflect the main arguments you will develop in your essay, in the order in which you will develop them.

A simple template for a thesis statement is: I believe _________ is important because of __________, __________ and __________.

Once you have the statement, you can go back if you have time and find a more interesting way to say it.

4. **Quick and Easy Format**

The chosen format for the timed essay should be kept as simple as possible in order to complete the essay as quickly as possible. Generally speaking, the format most often used for timed essays, is the traditional “5-paragraph, 3 main points” format. This is not the only format, however, as some of your main points may need to be fleshed out in more than one paragraph. Ideally, you will provide a transition from one paragraph to the next, tying them together, and start each paragraph with a topic sentence. A topic sentence is a sentence that expresses the main idea of the paragraph in which it occurs.

**Each paragraph includes:**

**1st Paragraph:** Introduction and background information, a clear and well-defined thesis statement.

**Tips:** Avoid sweeping generalizations like “In the history of the world…”

Don’t worry about writing a flashy introduction. The thesis is more important.

You can rewrite the essay question in your own words to save time, but do not simply restate verbatim (word-for-word).

**2nd Paragraph:** Body paragraph, contains a point supporting the thesis and evidence to support this point. May include examples, facts, stories, hypothetical situations, and explanations to support your ideas.
3rd Paragraph: Body paragraph, contains another point (the second point) that supports the thesis and evidence to support this point. May also include examples, facts, stories, hypothetical situations, and explanations to support your ideas.

4th Paragraph: Body paragraph, contains another, point (the third point) supporting the thesis and evidence to support this point. May also include examples, facts, stories, hypothetical situations, and explanations to support your ideas.

5th Paragraph: Concluding paragraph, wraps up the essay, restates the thesis statement

Tip: If you are really pressed for time, you may restate your thesis but do not simply restate verbatim. Find new ways to say the same thing.

5. Stay Focused

As you are writing your essay, you will likely have new ideas that you want to include, that you had not originally planned. You may include those new ideas, as long as they continue to support the thesis. It’s helpful to repeatedly go back to your thesis statement and ask yourself: “Am I still saying what I want to say?”

If, as you’re writing the essay, you decide you want to say something else that will result in a different conclusion, it’s important to go back and revise your thesis statement to match your conclusion. Assuming, of course, that your unexpected conclusion still addresses the assigned topic. And then go back and revise the sub-points and transitions so that your whole essay points towards that conclusion.

4. Leave Time for Revision

Proofreading and revision is essential. It’s helpful to write on every other line and leave the backs of the pages blank, so you will have room to make last minute changes if you need to. You can of course write in the margins, and if you are pressed for space and need to add a paragraph, you can insert an arrow leading to the new paragraph on the back of the same page.

Check your essay for:

- Clarity—does it make sense? Do you need to add any paragraphs or get rid of any?
- Repetition.
- Big words that look great but don’t add, or worse, take away meaning. Be specific.
- Any confusing sentences, words, ideas—get rid of them. Rephrase if necessary/you have time.
- Clichés, generalizations, and quotations that aren’t directly related to the topic.
- Information that is understandable, readable and to the point.
- Topic sentences and transitions. Do you have them? Are they clear?
- Spelling and grammar.
If you are writing an LPI essay, it’s especially important to check your grammar.

Things to look out for:

- Subject-Verb Agreement
- Misplaced Modifiers
- Verb Tense
- Articles (a, an, the)
- Singular/Plural Agreement

5. Don’t Forget the Conclusion

Your essay is incomplete without a conclusion. This is an opportunity to reaffirm your main point, and if you have time, you can add some new dimension to what you’ve already said. If you’re running out of time, a simple one-sentence conclusion emphasizing your main point should do the trick.