

Before You Start Writing:

Read the question carefully. The most critical part of the essay-writing process actually happens before you write your first word. When you flip to the essay question, make sure you read it as carefully as you can, noting the difference between words such as ‘contrast’ and ‘analyze’ and highlighting any details which the professor specifically instructs you to include. It’s not uncommon for excellent essays to receive low marks because the student answered a question other than the one that was asked.

Make a clear and specific plan. Some students react to the time pressure of essay exams by scribbling down their introduction as soon as they’ve read the question and figuring out their points as they go. While it might seem counter-intuitive, taking five or ten minutes before you start writing in order to draw up a plan will be an enormous time saver. Decide on your thesis, the topic of each paragraph, and the arguments which you intend to cover, then jot down some quick point-form notes. This process won’t take long, and, once you complete it, all that’s left will be to expand those notes into a well-organized essay. Without a clear plan, you run the risk of realizing partway through that you’ve drifted off topic or written yourself into a corner, and fixing these mistakes will consume a ton of extra time.

Schedule a set time for each paragraph. On the topic of planning, it’s important to sketch out an idea of how long you want to spend on each section of your essay. (If you know the number of paragraphs you’ll need to write ahead of time, you can do this before the exam even starts!) Take note of the amount of time allotted for the exam and split it into reasonably-sized segments, leaving some time at the end for revision if possible. Without a schedule to follow, it’s easy to become too focused on a single paragraph and run out of time to finish the essay.

While You’re Writing:

Write clearly and double-space. This tip may seem basic, but it’s easy to forget and it can make a big difference. Both these measures won’t just make it easier for the marker to read your paper; they’ll also help you write it. If you have time left at the end of the exam for review, having the ability to skim quickly through your work and write revisions in blank spaces will be incredibly helpful.

Keep yourself on schedule. Remember the paragraph-based schedule we discussed above? It’ll be useless if you don’t do regular check-ins during the exam. Keep an eye on the clock to ensure you’re always on track. If you realize that you’re falling dangerously behind schedule, it might be necessary to cut some arguments or examples you planned to include. Although making these omissions can be painful, it’s better to leave out a few points from one section than to leave out an entire paragraph because you ran out of time.

Don’t worry too much about editing and revision before you finish. When composing essays, many students stop and read over each paragraph once they finish it, making sure that it’s well-written and free of errors before advancing to the next one.

This approach is entirely logical when there's no time pressure involved, but it can actually work against you during an exam. Perfecting paragraphs is a time-consuming process, and, if you spend too much time editing before the essay is finished, you might have to rush through the last few sections or leave them out entirely. For this reason, it's best to focus on producing a complete first draft before you worry about edits and revisions.

After You've Finished Writing:

Re-read the question and ensure you've addressed all parts. The most important part of writing an essay exam is ensuring that you're answering the question was posed. Even if you made sure you were interpreting everything correctly before you began, you may have forgotten to address a subquestion or integrate an example as you were writing. Before you submit, read the prompt again and make sure your completed essay matches up!

Edit if you have time. If you have enough time left over, read your essay again and make corrections. When you're working under time pressure, it's easy to make grammar mistakes or produce hard-to-follow sentences; the final few minutes are your chance to clean up those errors. Unless if you finished way ahead of schedule, don't worry about major revisions like reorganizing the structure of the essay--it's better to hand in an essay with an imperfect structure than a paper that's impossible to follow because you had to stop halfway through the revision process.

Remember to have the right perspective. Once you hand your exam to the professor, relax! It's easy to work yourself up after an essay exam when you didn't get the chance to read your work over or you feel like your arguments were weak. However, it's important to keep in mind that your professor understands the circumstances under which the essay was written. They're fully aware of the time pressure you were dealing with, and they will judge your work far differently than they would judge a typical essay with a deadline set weeks after the assignment date. If you did your best to write a complete, clear, and insightful essay within the time allotted, you should have nothing to worry about.