HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR PERFORMANCE IN TIMED WRITING

Recognize the Truth about Timed Writing:

Just about everyone feels threatened, scared, highly stressed when faced with a timed-writing situation. This reaction is perfectly normal.

The bad news is there’s no escaping timed writing. You’re going to run into it: essay exams in classes, the Writing Proficiency Exam, even writing to a deadline on the job.

The good news is that readers expect the product of timed writing to be different than other writing. In academic settings, readers expect timed writings to have some surface errors that they don’t expect in finished, revised essays.

Control Your Response to Timed Writing:

Do not allow yourself to be intimidated. You may have observed students who just plow right in and seem to love timed writings. They may start writing before anyone, finish before anyone else, and even earn a high grade. Yes, these adrenaline addicts do exist. In the past, they may have intimidated you. Don’t let them. You need to realize that these writers may not do as well in revised writings because they don’t get the same “high” from sustained mental effort, real intellectual work. These students are not necessarily the better writers in the class. Do NOT worry about these students.

Instead, focus your energy on addressing the assignment as it is written. Avoid any impulse to argue with the topic or to be overly creative.

Deal with the subject as fully as possible within the time limit to give yourself a competitive edge. The typical in-class timed writing is thinly developed. Sometimes these essays pass; sometimes they don’t. The better essays have consistent specific development.

Finish. Force yourself.

Do NOT recopy the essay under any circumstances. Academic readers consider some cross-outs and arrows to be signs of a productive intelligent writer. (Neatness becomes an issue only when the reader cannot read what you have written.) Remember that surface perfection will not earn you points. A clear focus, thoughtfulness, and detail will.

Learn a Strategy that Works:

Practicing the following basic strategy will help you gain confidence in your ability to do well in timed-writing situations.

1. Read the writing assignment carefully TWICE.
2. Ask yourself: what is the question?
   Most timed-writing examinations are carefully drafted to restrict the subject, specify a method of development and organization, and suggest a thesis. Learn to work WITH the assignment. A key to doing well is to be able to extract the exact question from the assignment. Recognize—and underline—key words used as imperatives. Know what they mean. See below.
3. After extracting the exact question from the assignment, ask yourself: what is the answer? If you include the topic in your answer, your answer will serve as your thesis.
4. Before you begin writing, have a clear idea of the form and content required to answer the question. The best writers have a plan of development, including a controlling idea for each paragraph of development.
5. As you write, stay focused. Do no wander off on a side issue.
6. Before handing in your essay take two minutes to proofread. Fix any problems you can in the quickest way possible.

**Be Familiar with Key Words and Their Meanings:**

1. **Analyze**—divide an event, idea, or theory into its component elements, and examine each element in turn.
   Example: Analyze Milton Friedman’s theory of permanent income.
2. **Comment**—discuss as fully as possible from all vantage points that come to mind. Comments may be judgmental, expressing an opinion or attitude.
   Example: Comment on the marketing of credit cards to college students.
3. **Compare**—point out both similarities and differences.
   Example: Compare a republic with a constitutional monarchy.
4. **Contrast**—point out differences only; note degree of difference.
   Example: Contrast WordPerfect 6.0 with WordPerfect 7.0.
5. **Define**—explain the meaning of. Basic definitions place the article being defined within a class, and then distinguish it from other members of the same class. (Botany is the science [class] that deals with plants [distinguishes botany from other sciences].) An extended definition would continue to differentiate botany from other sciences.
   Example: Define anthropology.
6. **Describe**—tell about an even, person or process in detail, creating a clear and vivid image of it.
   Example: Describe the dress of a medieval knight.
7. **Discuss**—consider from various points of view; cite reasons or evidence to support different sides of an issue.
   Example: Discuss the use of Malathion in controlling Mediterranean Fruit Flies.
8. **Evaluate**—appraise; give an opinion regarding the value of; base your opinion on convincing evidence;
   Example: Evaluate the effectiveness of anti-lock braking systems.
9. **Explain**—make a topic as clear and understandable as possible: interpret, offer reasons, provide examples.
   Example: Explain the process of photosynthesis.
10. **Provide examples**—give typical instances; be specific.
    Example: Provide examples of endangered species.
11. **Summarize**—restate the main points in your own words; be brief, accurate, and objective.
    Example: Summarize Thoreau’s essay on civil disobedience.