



## Essay Exam Tip Sheet

Before the examination:

- 1) Read any source material that has been distributed. Make sure you read through several times, and leave yourself enough time to let the information sit with you.
- 2) Make sure you can clearly identify the 'argument' of the material
  - a. What concerns are being addressed?
  - b. Are there any common themes that you're picking up on?
  - c. What do you agree/disagree with?

During the examination:

Step One: Prewriting

- 1) Read the prompt CAREFULLY, this is incredibly important!
- 2) Budget your time: Take the total time allotted and give yourself roughly 1/4th of the time to make a detailed outline, 2/4ths of the time to write, and 1/4<sup>th</sup> of the time to revise and read your work.
- 3) If you feel confident in your outlining abilities, I'd recommend a more drastic division of time, and suggest 1/3 of your time be spent in the outlining phase
  - a. For example, if you are given 1.5 hours to complete the examination, I'd say spend at least 30 minutes outlining, 45 minutes composing, and 15 minutes for quick revisions.
- 4) Begin your outline. This should be a thoughtful, detailed, and exact formula for you to base your essay on. A well-constructed outline will automatically lead to a well-constructed essay, and alleviates many concerns normally saved for revision, such as continuity, flow, and clarity of argument.
- 5) How to make the outline:

(Side note: I recommend basing your essay off of a 5-6 paragraph essay model. The 5-paragraph essay can be a bit crude and restrictive for essays, but when you write 'instantly', the model can be an excellent way to insure that your argument will follow logical and clear developments. I find it helps me to keep my essay focused and concise, and eliminates many steps that usually occur in the revision process.)

  - a. What was your first thought after reading the prompt? What is your immediate reaction? How does this reaction relate to your thoughts about the article (see "Before the examination") in regard to common themes and argument?
  - b. Begin by concentrating on clarifying your stance as well as possible—this will lead to your thesis statement. As a part of this clarification, identify 3-4 key components of your opinion. These will lead to your body paragraph topics.
  - c. Write out your opinion in several ways. This will help you identify the best and most accurate structure for your thesis statement. Think about *how* you will say what you want to say.
  - d. Begin the outline with the introduction: Write the first sentence of your essay, and jot a few key points of any sort of general/background information that might help the reader enter into your thesis and opinion on the issue. Finally, write out your thesis.



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- e. Outline your body paragraphs. (I recommend having AT LEAST 3-4.) For each body paragraph, write out one key component of your argument (see b). Underneath this general heading, write out your topic sentence. I find that writing out the topic sentences and thesis statement during the outline phase makes it much easier to transition smoothly from point to point in the actual essay.
- f. Underneath the topic sentence, jot down AT LEAST 2-3 points of supporting evidence, either from the source material distributed before the exam, or outside material (if allowed). If you would like, add commentary next to the evidence, as it will help you keep track of the 'opinion' of the essay.
- g. Next to each piece of evidence, write the citation. This will help you save time when writing the essay because you won't have to go back and look for the citation a second time.
- h. Outline your conclusion: is there a counter-argument that you need to address? What conclusion would you like the reader to reach after having read the essay? Go over your major concerns—this does NOT mean re-stating your topic sentences or even your thesis. Rather, use the conclusion to circle back to the essay prompt. Consider, "what is the significance of this issue?" If applicable, open the issue up to a more general/ grander scale and audience.

### Step two: Write the essay

- 1) Go strictly by your outline—it will keep your paper concise and focused
- 2) Work on the essay by a process of 'filling in' the outline. You have already written a thesis, topic sentences, the evidence you will use, the citations for the evidence, and your thoughts on what exactly the evidence points to.
- 3) In this phase, focus on stating your thoughts cleanly and simply—don't go for flowery language, impressive vocabulary, or 'style' as much as you might on a non-instant essay. The trick with writing on the fly is maintaining focus, and simple, straight-forward statements, in addition to non-repetitive sentences (i.e. saying something several ways) will greatly help you keep control over the progression of the essay.
- 4) After writing each paragraph RE-READ it before moving onto the next—this will help you with transitional sentences.

### Step three: Quick revision

- 1) If you outlined carefully, the revision process should be relatively simple. Don't worry about re-working your argument at this point. Even if your newer thoughts on the argument are perhaps 'better', you will not have time to properly fix the bulk of the writing in order to achieve this aim. It is better to offer a clean, clear, and organized piece of writing than a messy, un-focused, and 'draft-like' essay that feels more authentic to your opinion. This is incredibly counter-intuitive for most students. Do not feel bad about having to go against your normal academic impulse.



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- 2) Re-read the entire essay. If able, read the essay out loud to yourself. This will help you to identify grammatical mistakes and clunky phrasing as you go through, and will make cleaning up careless mistakes fairly easy. Even if you do not catch all spelling errors and unnecessary commas, don't fret. You simply do not have the time to turn in a 'perfect' essay, and catching the majority of mistakes will give the essay more polish, and help 'boost' the overall impression of your paper.
- 3) Take a deep breath! You're finished, and you probably did a wonderful job.