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Writing Under Pressure

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Write well-organized answers to essay tests; write effective in-class essays.

Frequently in college you will be required to write clearly and correctly in a brief time and under pressure—for example, when you write compositions in class and when you take essay examinations.

(1) Write clear, concise, well-organized answers on essay tests.

When you write an answer to an essay question, you are conveying information, but you also are proving to your audience—the examiner—that you have mastered the information and can work with it. In other words, your purpose is both informative and persuasive. There are several things you can do in preparing for and taking an essay examination to insure that you do the best job you can.

Prepare trial questions.

Perhaps the best way to get ready for an essay examination is to prepare yourself from the first day of class. Try to decide what is most important about the material you have been learning and pay attention to indications that your instructor considers certain material especially important. As you assimilate facts and concepts, attempt to work out questions that your instructor is likely to ask. Then plan how you would answer such a question.

Plan your time.

Although you will be working under severe pressure of time, take a few minutes to plan your time and your answer. Determine how many minutes you can devote to each answer. Answer the questions that are worth the most points first (unless your mind is a blank about them at that moment).

Read instructions and questions carefully.

During your examination, first read the question carefully. Most essay examination questions are carefully worded and contain specific instructions about how as well as what you are to answer. Always answer exactly the question asked without digressing to related areas unless they are called for. Furthermore, if you are asked to define or identify, do not evaluate. Instead, give clear, concise, and accurate answers. If you are asked to explain, you must demonstrate that you have a depth of understanding about the subject. If you are asked to evaluate, you must decide what is important and then measure what you plan to say against that yardstick. If you are asked to compare and contrast, you will need to have a thorough knowledge of at least two subjects and you will need to show efficiently how they are similar and/or different.

Plan your answer.

Jot down the main points you intend to make as you think through how you plan to respond. This list of main points can serve as a working plan to help you stay on target.

State main points clearly.

State your thesis in the first paragraph so that the instructor will know what you intend. Make your main points stand

out from the rest of the essay by identifying them in some way. For instance, you can use transitional expressions such as *first*, *second*, *third*, you can underline each main point, or you can create headings to guide the reader.

Support generalizations.

Be sure that you support any generalizations that you make with specific details, examples, and illustrations. Write with assurance to help convince the instructor that you have a thorough knowledge of the subject. Make sure your answers are complete; do not write one- or two-sentence answers unless it is clearly specified that you should. Do not, however, pad your answers in an effort to make the instructor think you know more than you do. A clearly stated, concise, emphatic, and complete answer, though somewhat brief, will impress a reader much more than a fuzzy, shotgun-style answer that is much longer.

Stick to the question.

Sometimes you may know more about a related question than you do about the question asked. Do not wander from the question asked and try to answer a question you think you could handle better. Similarly, make sure that you follow your thesis as you answer the question and do not include material that is irrelevant.

Revise and proofread.

Finally, save a few minutes to reread your answer. Make whatever corrections and revisions you think are necessary. It is much better to cross out a paragraph that is irrelevant (and to replace it with a relevant one if time permits) than to allow it to stand. Similarly, consider whether your sen-

tences are clear and correct. Check sentence structure, spelling, and punctuation; clarify any illegible scribbles.

(2) Write well-organized, clear in-class essays.

Writing an in-class essay is much like writing any other essay except that you are usually given the topic and you must produce the finished essay during one class period. Because the writing process is so compressed, you must plan to make the best use of your time that you can. Reserve a few minutes at the end of the class period for revising and proofreading. Take a few minutes at the beginning of the class period to consider your main idea, or thesis, and make at least a mental plan.

As you draft the essay, keeping your plan in mind will help you stay on the track. Pace yourself so that you can cover all your major points. Don't forget transitions. It is just as important to support your generalizations and to stick to the point in an in-class essay as in an essay test or in an essay you write at home.

In the time you have saved for revision and proofreading, check your essay for unity and coherence. Strike out any unrelated matter and make any needed insertions. Unless you are instructed to do so, it is best not to use your revising time to make a clean copy of the essay. Make your revisions as neatly and clearly as possible (see also page 95). Proofread carefully.

■ **Exercise 7** Write and revise a composition from the work you did in Exercises 4 through 6.

■ **Exercise 8** Carefully read the following composition in preparation for a class discussion of (1) its title and thesis, (2) its purpose and audience, (3) its arrangement and development of main points, (4) its beginning and ending. Also be prepared to discuss how the word choice and the use of specific details contribute to the tone of the essay.

The "Miracle" of Technofix

Somehow this nation has become caught in what I call the mire of "technofix": the belief, reinforced in us by the highest corporate and political forces, that all our current crises can be solved, or at least significantly eased, by the application of modern high technology. In the words of former Atomic Energy Commission chairman Glenn Seaborg: "We must pursue the idea that it is more science, better science, more wisely applied that is going to free us from [our] predicaments."

Energy crisis? Try synfuels. Never mind that they will require billions—eventually trillions—of dollars transferred out of the public coffers into the energy companies' pockets, or that nobody has yet fully explored, much less solved, the problems of environmental damage, pollution, hazardous-waste disposal and occupational dangers their production will create. Never mind—it's technofix.

Food for the hungry world? Try the "Green Revolution." Never mind that such farming is far more energy- and chemical-intensive than any other method known, and therefore generally too expensive for the poor countries that are supposed to benefit from it, or that its principle of monoculture over crop diversity places whole regions, even whole countries, at the risk of a single breed of disease or pest. Never mind—it's scientific.

Diseases? Try wonder drugs. Never mind that few of the thousands of drugs introduced every year have ever been fully tested for long-range effects, or that they are vastly overprescribed and overused, or that nearly half of them prove to be totally ineffective in treating the ailments they are administered for and half of the rest produce unintended side effects. Never mind—it's progress.

And progress, God help us all, may be our most important product.

—KIRKPATRICK SALE