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Writing an In-Class Essay

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Most of the essays a writer composes will take place at home, in the library, or in a dorm, but more than a few courses require students to write in the classroom. The purpose of this article is to show writers how to prepare and write a brief but informative and well-organized in-class essay.

Thinking in Real Time

As a student, you will likely have many opportunities to write in-class essays. College professors often see them as an opportunity for students to think quickly and cogently on their feet. Many graduate and professional programs require in-class writing as a means of testing knowledge for qualifying exams and certifications. In-class essays are typically included as an exam and based on a prompt that your instructor provides. While many view in-class essays as daunting because of the time constraints, these essays do not have to be stressful.

Timing is Everything

Argumentation and organization are the two main factors in writing a successful in-class essay. A well-written thesis and well-organized structure will give you a clear direction for your essay and make it easier to write within the time limit. Before you construct your thesis, be sure to read the prompt fully and carefully. Pay attention to keywords in the prompt (i.e., describe, explain, analyze, compare), which will tell you how to approach your thesis. After you have decided on your thesis, you need to organize your essay. The best way to properly organize your in-class essay is to create a short outline before you begin. Because your outline acts as a road map for your argument, it will ultimately save you time as you write. Your outline should include the main points as well as examples to flesh out each of those points.

Remember, in-class essays are focused more on quality than quantity. Pre-writing, therefore, is just as important as drafting. You will likely only have time to include up to two examples for each point, so choose examples that are relevant and powerful. Keep in mind that your outline does not need to be detailed; its purpose is to show only the main ideas of your essay. Finally, be sure to plan your time wisely. If, for example, you have 30 minutes for your in-class essay, you'll probably want 10 minutes to build your outline and 20 minutes to draft your essay.

Examples

Imagine your instructor gives you a prompt for an in-class essay that reads, "Describe the different functions of spiritual songs displayed in the Book of Psalms." Your thesis and outline for this prompt might read:

Thesis: While the psalms vary in subject and style, two main functions of spiritual songs are to glorify God and to cultivate emotional intimacy with God.

- Point one: songs glorify God through praise and thanksgiving
 - Psalm 100: worshipping God
 - Psalm 103: remembering God's goodness

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- Point two: songs create intimacy through honest emotion
 - Psalm 22: seeking God in sorrow and suffering
 - Psalm 42: longing for God in times of despair

Or your instructor gives you a prompt that reads, “Compare and contrast Prince Hamlet and Prince Harry in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *Henry IV, Pt. 1*.” Your thesis and outline might read:

Thesis: While Prince Harry and Prince Hamlet both distance themselves from leadership in their youth, Harry later embraces his duty as a leader, while Hamlet uses his position as a leader for revenge.

- Point one: Hamlet and Harry as young men
 - Hamlet’s absence from his kingdom
 - Harry’s life with Falstaff and friends
- Point two: Difference in leadership
 - Hamlet’s revenge and disregard for others
 - Harry’s courage and love for others

Conclusion

Though often a point of contention between students and professors, in-class essays are a valuable way to improve your critical thinking and writing skills under pressure. If you focus on writing with clarity and organizing your material, you will not have to fear time limitations. The more you practice writing in-class essays, the more comfortable and confident you will be when writing for exams.

Tips

1. When making your outline, try to use key phrases and/or shorter sentences. Writing longer sentences will use up your time.
2. If possible, leave yourself a few minutes to proofread your essay so that you can see how your argument flows or correct any major mistakes.
3. Relax! Stress will only hinder your progress. Remember your material and rely on the tools you have been given, and you will write well.

Works Consulted

“Guide to Writing In-Class Essays.” Purdue University, <https://www.pfw.edu/offices/learning-support/documents/guide-to-writing-in-class-essays.pdf>. Accessed 22 July 2024.

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