

## How to write in-class essays and short answer exams:

### 1. Before the exam:

- As you are preparing for the exam, try to imagine what kinds of questions the professor could ask and try to answer these questions.
- If you received a list of possible questions before the exam, try answering ALL of them. Playing a game of statistical probabilities (that the questions about the text you *haven't* read won't be asked) is not a smart move.
- Try to get a good night's sleep before any exam.
- Allow for problems, traffic jams, delays in public transportation, snow, etc. and make sure you arrive with time to spare so you are not breathless and in a rush when you start the exam.
- Wear comfortable clothes and a jacket that you can easily remove if the room gets too hot or wear if the room gets too cold.
- Bring extra pens/pencils/erasers to the exam.

### 2. How to start planning your time:

- Read ALL the instructions FIRST.
- Find out any information about time (for example, some instructions will say "recommended time: 10-25 minutes").
- Divide out your time according to
  - directions
  - assigned marks
  - difficulty of the questions
  - length of the essays/short answers
- Keep a close eye on your watch and don't go over the time you allotted yourself for the different sections of the test. You can always go back to a previous section if you have extra time at the end.

### 3. How to understand the questions:

- Read all the instructions and questions AGAIN.
- Circle/underline/highlight signposts (for example: "first, second, third..." or "you must choose 2 questions" or "write an outline for your essay" or "compare the ideas in this poem with two other texts" or "you do not necessarily need to..." or "for any three texts..." or "no more than three words").
- Circle/underline/highlight verbs (for example: analyze, compare, explain, relate, define, discuss).
- Circle/underline/highlight other key words.

#### 4. How to write the answers:

- ALWAYS start with the questions/sections that are worth the most points.
- ALWAYS start with the easiest questions/sections. Make sure you write everything you know first, and then spend the time you have left answering questions with complicated/unknown answers.
- Make sure to answer ALL the questions.
- If the professor does not specifically tell you to use a pen, use a pencil so that you can erase things without making a mess.
- If the professor does not specify a format, double space your text (leave every other line blank) so that you have space to add things easily at the end, when checking through your work one last time.
- Don't try to write complicated sentences or to remember complicated words. Stay simple and say things in a clear and simple manner.
- For an essay, always try to write an outline first. Create a thesis statement from this outline. Once you are done writing the text, do a quick "reverse outline" and verify that your thesis statement is still accurate. A "reverse outline" is a one-sentence summary of each paragraph.
- If you are provided with notes, tables, texts, diagrams, flow charts, or images, always use the information closely and precisely.
- For short answers, make sure to start each short answer with a "thesis statement/topic sentence," telling your reader exactly what your paragraph will be about.
- Always give yourself 10-15 minutes to go over all your answers/your text before the end of the exam to add/change/remove information if necessary and to verify your grammar and spelling.
- When you get stuck on one question, MOVE ON to the next question rather than wasting time. If you don't know the answer to a particular question, leave it and go on to the next question. Give yourself enough time at the end of the exam to return to that question.
- Avoid panicking and thinking negative thoughts. If you get stuck, start working on something else (another section, verifying that you have a thesis statement, spelling, etc.) and then go back to where you were once you are feeling a little calmer.
- If you run out of time, answer with bullet-point sentences instead of full paragraphs (if your professor has not specifically instructed you NOT to do so). Focus on saying everything you remember about that particular question as quickly as possible without worrying about the organization of your ideas.

#### 5. Personal tips:

- I am always at least 30 minutes early because I have gotten the wrong day or the wrong time, or I have forgotten something important, or I have found myself stuck in traffic, or I have had difficulties finding the right building/room, etc.
- Before the exams, I memorize lists of key words (terms I want to use, authors I want to cite, quotations, key ideas in a text, etc.). As soon as I am allowed to start writing, I write down these lists as quickly as possible so that I can use them later, during the exam.
- I read all the questions first and very quickly jot down ideas that come to my mind, in no particular order, before I start answering questions more systematically.
- I use the back of my sheets to write quick outlines before I answer long/complex questions/essays.
- I am always cold when I am nervous, so I always bring an extra sweater.