

Tips for Writing on Demand

Advice drawn from *The Prentice Hall Guide for College Writers*, 2nd ed. and *Harbrace College Handbook*, 12th ed.

Few of us create our best writing when we're put on the spot, but there are some things we can do to improve our chances of writing well on tasks like essay exams. Here are some tips for how to prepare for writing on demand assignments.

Consider your purpose: When you write an answer to an essay question, you are conveying information, but you are also 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.

Prepare ahead of time: Well before you begin the exam, decide what is most important about the material you have been learning and pay attention to signs for what your instructor considers to be especially important. Anticipate questions that your instructor is likely to ask and plan how to answer such sample questions; think through the examples which would support various questions.

Read instructions and questions carefully: First, read the exam and underline specific directions (i.e., choose topic 1 or 2). Then read the question that you are answering. If there are alternatives (i.e., using 3 of the following texts...), choose wisely and stick to your choice. Most questions are carefully worded and contain specific instructions about *how* as well as *what* you are to answer (i.e., compare vs. explain vs. analyze). (*See reverse for key terms frequently used in essay questions.*)

Plan your time. Take a few minutes to make a time schedule based on the value assigned to each question, or divide the time that you have by the number of questions. Reserve some time to revise and proofread. If you find you are running out of time, outline the answers that you do not have time to write completely.

Plan your answer. Jot down the main points you intend to make as you think through how you will respond. This list of main points can serve as a rough outline to help you stay on topic.

State main points clearly. Spell out a clear thesis, and use strong topic sentences in each body paragraph. Use transitional expressions to show the connections between your points.

Support claims. Be sure you support claims with specific details, examples, and illustrations. You don't have to memorize quotations from literature, but the more relevant details you recall, the better. Write to convince the instructor that you have a thorough knowledge of the subject; use course terms accurately, and make sure your answers are complete. Do not, however, pad your answers, ramble, or simply summarize plot. (*continued*)

Stick to the question. Sometimes you may know more about a related question than you do about the question asked. Avoid the temptation to wander away from the real question to a question you're better prepared for. Similarly, make sure that you keep focused on your thesis as you answer the question, and do not include irrelevant material just to show it off.

Revise and proofread. Save a few minutes to reread your essay. Correct sentence structure, spelling, and punctuation; clarify any illegible scribbles.

Key Terms Used in Essay Questions

DISCUSS: A general instruction that means “write about.” If the question says “discuss,” look for other key words to focus your response.

DESCRIBE: Give sensory details or particulars about a topic. Often, however, this general information simply means “discuss.”

ANALYZE: Divide a topic into its parts and show how the parts are related to each other and to the topic as a whole.

SYNTEHSIZE: Show how the parts relate to the whole or how the parts make sense together.

EXPLAIN: Show relationships between specific examples and general principles. Explain what (define), explain why (causes/effects), and/or explain how (analyze process).

DEFINE: Explain what something is. As appropriate, give a formal definition, describe it, analyze its parts or function, describe what it is not, and/or compare and contrast it with similar events or ideas.

COMPARE: Explain similarities and (often) differences. Draw conclusions from the observed similarities and differences.

CONTRAST: Explain key differences. Draw conclusions from the observed differences.

ILLUSTRATE: Provide specific examples of an idea or process.

TRACE: Give the sequence or chronological order of key events or ideas.

EVALUATE: Determine the value or worth of an idea, thing, process, person, or event. Set up criteria and provide evidence to support your judgments.

SOLVE: Explain your solution; show how it fixes the problem, why it is better than other alternatives, and why it is feasible.

ARGUE: Present both sides of a controversial issue, showing why the opposing position should not be believed or accepted and why your position should be accepted. Give evidence to support your position.

INTERPRET: Offer your understanding of the meaning and significance of an idea, event, person, process, or work of art. Support your understanding with specific examples or details.