

What, Why, and How?

11

Timed Writing

Reviewing the elements of an essay
Breaking down a prompt
Creating a rough outline
Managing your time
Practicing
Additional tips
Timed writing checklist

WHAT IS TIMED WRITING?

Also called timed essays, essay exams, or in-class essays, these essays require you to demonstrate disciplinary knowledge by producing a writing sample within a limited time period. Timed writing measures your raw writing ability and your skill at thinking under pressure. It also reflects your ability to quickly recall, synthesize, and analyze detailed material. One of the major skills that is being tested in a timed writing exam is your ability to write to a prompt. A prompt is simply the exam question or writing task. In a timed exam, your thesis will generally be your answer to the prompt.

WHY STRENGTHEN THIS SKILL?

Being skilled at timed writing is important because...

- oftentimes when you transfer to another college, you will be required to take a timed essay placement exam or graduate exit exam, so placing higher will save you time and money spent on taking additional classes and later enable you to get your degree.
- some large survey courses base the majority of the student grade on in-class timed exams.
- it improves your own mental agility—being able to think quickly and logically is an invaluable skill.
- in college and in life, you will be required to compose arguments (written and verbal) on the spot, so the better you are at it, the more convincing and successful you will be.
- American culture highly values polished written skills, so the more adept you are at crafting well written responses and proposals quickly, you'll be the one who gets better grades, gets hired, gets the promotion, and will get more respect due to your effective communication skills.

HOW DO I DO IT?

Timed writing is challenging, so break down the task into manageable stages:

- 1. Review the elements of an essay (so you are sure to craft a good one).**
- 2. Know how to successfully break down a prompt.**
- 3. Create a rough outline.**
- 4. Have a time management plan.**
- 5. Practice!**

Reviewing the elements of an essay

Writing in a timed situation can be stressful so go in having a clear and confident sense of your goal: to produce a focused, organized, developed, proofread essay. Even in a timed situation, you will be expected to write an essay with the standard essay elements so here is a review of what to include:

FOCUS-THESIS:

One of the major skills that is being tested in a timed writing exam is your ability to write to the prompt. Your thesis will be your direct answer or response to the question or task in the prompt.

A thesis needs to be arguable (contain your opinion).

No opinion—not a thesis: In Sarah Katin’s “Naked,” the narrator tells of her uncomfortable experience in a Korean bathhouse.

Arguable thesis with opinion: In Sarah Katin’s “Naked,” the narrator’s experience in a Korean bathhouse reveals that American notions of nudity are unhealthy and harmfully produce feelings of shame and this distances women from each other.

You will want to make your thesis immediately clear to your reader, so it is best to put your thesis statement in your introductory paragraph. Then stay focused on proving that thesis throughout the essay. Anything that does not directly prove your thesis and respond to the prompt should not be included in the essay.

ORGANIZATION:

Considering both your argument and your allotted writing time, select an appropriate number of main points you can adequately develop, and present them in a clear order, so the essay proceeds smoothly and logically from one point to the next. Be sure to put your main supporting points into separate paragraphs, so there is a clear beginning, middle and end as opposed to a long, uninterrupted block of text. **Here are some common methods of organization:**

- *Climax:* Present your ideas so they build to a climax, ending with your most dramatic examples.
- *Complexity:* Start with simpler ideas and build to more complex ones.
- *Familiarity:* Start with more familiar ideas and move towards newer ones.
- *Audience appeal:* Start with “safe” ideas and move to more challenging ones.
- *Chronological:* Present ideas in the time order in which they occurred.
- *Comparison/contrast:* Examine the similarities and/or differences between two or more items.

DEVELOPMENT:

Avoid a series of skimpy paragraphs that are too short to concretely prove your points. Each of your body paragraphs should be lead with strong topic sentences that are then proven with evidence and analysis. Ask yourself, “How do I know this is true?”

Include the elements of the **PIE paragraph** approach:

(P)oint: begin each paragraph with an arguable topic sentence that directly supports your thesis.

(I)nformation: provide clear and convincing evidence to illustrate the point in the form of examples, quotes and paraphrases from the text, facts, illustrations, personal knowledge, personal experiences, etc.

(E)xplanation: include your own explanation of the significance of the point and information in the paragraph. So what can we learn from this? So what is the significance? So what are the larger implications or impact?

SENTENCE CRAFTING:

In timed writing, you won’t have a lot of time to spend worrying over the spelling of a word or the placement of a comma. However, you also don’t want to turn in a piece of writing that contains excessive grammatical, punctuation, and/or spelling errors. **Therefore, set time aside at the end to proofread your essay.**

- (1) If writing by hand, you can double space so when you proofread and want to cross out confusing sentences or misspellings or add left out words or examples, you will have room and won’t risk confusing your reader.
- (2) Read carefully to catch confusing sentences, errors in subject-verb agreement, verb tenses, run together sentences, etc., and look for opportunities to join sentences.
- (3) If you discover a place where more concrete detail is needed, add examples and evidence as needed.

Breaking down a prompt

In timed writing, you will be given a prompt. Be sure to use techniques to effectively break down and fully understand that prompt before you begin the writing task. This will ensure you do not write off topic or miss important elements of the assignment.

It is essential to understand and identify key words within any writing prompt. Here are some commonly used command verbs used in prompts. It is not guaranteed these words will be used, but if they are, be sure you understand what each command is asking you to do:

Key Words Commonly Used in Writing Assignments/Prompts:

Describe: Write about the subject so the reader can easily visualize it; tell how it looks or happened. Use adjectives, adverbs and descriptive language to paint a mental image for you reader.

Compare: Analyze the similarities *and* the differences between two or more items.

Contrast: Look only at the differences between two or more items.

Explain: Give the meaning of something often answering the question “why”?

Discuss: Provide a broader range of possibilities that critically explore your topic.

Argue: Present a point of view or take a position and prove it. Don’t be concerned about taking the “right” or “wrong” position; just support a position soundly and consistently.

Analyze: Break the subject down into parts, and explain and critically examine the various parts.

Criticize/Critique: Point out both the positive and negative aspects of the topic.

Evaluate: Give your opinion of the value of the subject; discuss its strengths and weaknesses.

Illustrate: Make the point or idea by giving examples.

Trace: Tell about an event or process in chronological (time) order.

Prove: Show that something is true by giving facts or logical reasons.

State: Give the main points in a brief, clear form.

STEPS TO BREAK DOWN A PROMPT

Since you have a limited amount of time, do not waste any of it writing off topic. Follow exactly what was asked in the prompt. Try this approach:

- (1) **Read the prompt carefully and several times:** do not “rush in” and start writing as this puts you in danger of writing off topic or missing important parts of the prompt. Take a moment and read the prompt through several times.
- (2) **Sum up the topic in a few words:** What is the focus of the prompt? Narrow down the focus of the prompt in a word or two to help you mentally focus as well.
- (3) **Circle and/or underline the key words:** Circle or underline the command verbs or question words that are telling you do something or asking you about something.
- (4) **Identify and count the required steps in the writing task:** this is a crucial step in timed writing. You don’t want to overlook any parts of the question and get little to no credit for your work as a result. Number the parts of the prompt you need to address in your essay and oftentimes you can even use this as an informal outline for the essay.

PRACTICE

Use the method of breaking down a prompt

STEPS TO BREAK DOWN A PROMPT:

- (1) Read the prompt carefully and several times
- (2) Sum up the topic in a few words
- (3) Circle and/or underline the key words
- (4) Identify and count the required steps in the writing task

PROMPT:

In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Frederick Douglass contends “there can be no freedom without education.” Citing specific examples from the text, discuss this concept and examine how Douglass is a testament to this idea. Then explain how this concept can be applied today and what we can learn by applying Douglass’ words to a modern day example.

- (1) Read the prompt carefully and several times
- (2) Sum up the topic in a few words: _____
- (3) Circle and/or underline the key words
- (4) Identify and count the required steps in the writing task

Creating a rough outline

Outlining is the road map for the essay. And we all know that when you are rushing to get somewhere quickly, it is easier to get lost. Outlines make sure that you end up where you intended. For timed writing, you’ll make the most informal kind of outline in which you jot down your main points and possible supporting evidence. This kind of outline is for you only, and you don’t need to worry about making it more comprehensive if it does the job for you.

PRACTICE

Use the Douglass prompt you just broke down and create a rough outline for it.

Possible thesis:

Main supporting point:

Supporting evidence:

Main supporting point:

Supporting evidence:

Main supporting point:

Supporting evidence:

Main supporting point:

Supporting evidence:

Managing your time

Since taking a timed exam puts you in the situation of having a limited amount of time to create a focused, organized, well supported essay, you better have a clear plan of how you will use your allotted time *before* beginning the exam. Suggested breakdown of time:

- 10-15% of time: **Prewriting:**
- (1) Read the prompt carefully, circling key words, counting parts
 - (2) Make a rough outline to determine your thesis, main supporting points and strongest evidence.
- 70-80% of time: **Write the essay:**
- (3) Write your essay following the outline.
 - (4) Skip lines in case you want to make some changes when you're proofreading after you complete the essay.
- 10-15% of time: **Proofreading:**
- (5) Proofread your essay carefully adding missed evidence, catching misspellings, putting in left out words, revising confusing sentences, joining sentences, etc. Wait until the end to proofread. Focusing on sentence-level concerns as you compose the essay will slow you down too much and potentially sacrifice essay content.

Practicing

We all know we are better at something when we practice. Were you a good driver the first time you got behind the wheel? If you've played a sport or an instrument over the years, how were your skills when you first started? The same is true for timed writing. The more you practice, the better, more confident, and more accomplished you become.

Also, when you have a timed written exam coming up, you can ask your teacher for a practice prompt or you can create one yourself. The best preparation you can do is to take a practice timed exam on the topic you are being tested on. Also, if you take a practice exam ahead of time, you can even make an appointment with your instructor to go over the practice exam and get valuable advice and feedback you can then directly apply on the graded exam.

Here are some practice prompts:

Prompt—English 100 in-class essay (30 minutes)

In his book, Jim Rogers explores the issue of music file sharing on the internet and he looks at how the record companies have tried to sue individuals, web sites, and internet service providers for copyright infringement. Do you feel any of these groups should be held financially responsible for sharing music? Why or why not? Do you feel anyone is harmed by music file sharing?

Prompt—English 846 midterm (90 minutes)

Analyzing their book *YouTube*, describe three moral or ethical concerns that Jean Burgess and Joshua Green address about YouTube. What are the authors' views about these concerns? Respond to and analyze each of these concerns giving your opinion on each. Finally, looking at these concerns together, explain how you feel this does or should shape the management and future of YouTube.

Prompt—English 110 midterm (75 minutes)

J.T. Rogers' play *The Overwhelming* is set during the 1994 Rwandan genocide of the Tutsis by the Hutus. Examine why you think the playwright decided to tell this tragic story of an African country through this family of Americans. Also, why construct the characters that he did: the middle-aged college professor trying to publish, his 17 year old son who just lost his mother, and his second wife, a writer and an African-American woman? Examine how the use of these American characters affect and shape the larger story being told.

Prompt—History 100 practice midterm (75 minutes)

"History repeats itself.
Has to.
Nobody listens."

--Steve Turner

A famous maxim says that those who fail to remember and learn from the events of history— economic failures, wars, injustices, strife—are doomed to repeat them. By learning from historical events, by listening to the message of history, a nation or people can avoid repeating the errors of the past. Identify one such significant past event that has been covered in the reading, discuss its effects and explain why we should remember it.

Prompt—English 846 Final exam (2.5 hours)

Select three (3) of the authors and texts we have read this semester and examine how each author argues that greed and materialism function in our lives in the U.S. Explain who is mainly guilty of greed and who is most affected and how. Finally, explain what you feel, and analyze the larger impact of your views.

Prompt— English 100 Final exam (2.5 hours)

Compare the different ways that four of the authors that we have read this semester used activism to change their current system and to bring about social change, and explain what we can learn about effective approaches through this comparison. Finally, argue which of the four you feel was the most successful as a revolutionary and as you make your case, be sure to define "revolutionary" and "success" according to you, and explain the implications and importance of your findings.

Prompt— English 110 Final exam (2.5 hours)

Select three (3) of the authors and texts we have read this semester (one poem, one short story, and one play), and compare the characters the authors have created in order to examine the pressures women in particular face. Describe the gender-based expectations placed on these women and examine the impact. Finally, examine the connecting patterns that transcend location and time era in regards to the attitudes toward and treatment of women.

Additional tips

- **Relax:** You know what an essay is. You know that it has an introduction, several body paragraphs, and a conclusion. You have done essays before, and you know what you're doing now. The more you can take the exam in a calm and confident state, the better you will do.
- **Bring a watch or timepiece:** You want to be in control of your time and not the other way around, so be aware of the remaining time throughout the exam. Follow your time management plan but make adjustments as you see fit. For instance, if you budgeted 15 minutes for proofreading and in your last 15 minutes you don't yet have a conclusion, donate 5 minutes of your proofreading time to your conclusion. Be in control of your time so you can be sure that you complete all your tasks in the time allotted.
- **Check out the testing room in advance, if possible:** This way, you'll be better able to judge the amount of time you need to get there, and you'll be more familiar with the test setting.
- **Get plenty of sleep the previous night:** no one does well when sleep deprived. Stay in the night before an exam, study but you shouldn't be causing yourself stress by cramming last minute. Go to bed at a decent hour and be sure to have a healthy meal before the exam. Being physically prepared will improve your mental preparedness.
- **If you are prone to distraction:** sit apart from other test takers.
- **Listen to music:** some can focus better when listening to music. Check with your professor or the exam proctor ahead of time to see if it's ok to listen to music using headphones during the exam.

Timed writing checklist

Here is a checklist with an overview of the timed writing advice you can review before taking a timed exam:

- Think about focus-thesis: form an arguable thesis that responds directly to the prompt and stay focused on proving it throughout the essay. Put your thesis in the introductory paragraph. Anything in the essay that doesn't prove the thesis and wasn't asked about in the prompt is off topic.**
- Think about organization: choose an appropriate number of main supporting points you can adequately develop, present them in a logical order, and put each one into a separate paragraph.**
- Think about development: create well-developed paragraphs including the elements of PIE: (P)oint: strong topic sentences, (I)nformation: convincing evidence, (E)xplanation: your own reasoning and analysis.**
- Think about sentence crafting: save time at the end to proofread to correct any grammar, punctuation, or spelling errors and to improve sentence logic and flow.**
- Break down the prompt: read it carefully, sum up the topic in a word or two, underline/circle key words (command and question words), and number the different parts or tasks. Address all parts in the response.**
- Create a rough outline before you start writing, so you can stay focused on what was asked and be sure to address all parts of the prompt.**
- Make a time management plan dividing your allotted time for three tasks: 10-15% for prewriting, 70-80% for writing, 10-15% for proofreading.**
- Practice writing timed essays to strengthen skills before taking timed exams for a grade.**

ANSWERS

Possible answers for BREAKING DOWN A PROMPT:

STEPS TO BREAK DOWN A PROMPT:

- (1) Read the prompt carefully and several times
- (2) Sum up the topic in a few words
- (3) Circle and/or underline the key words
- (4) Identify and count the required steps in the writing task

(2) Sum up the topic in a few words: **TOPIC = FREEDOM THROUGH EDUCATION**

In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Frederick Douglass contends “there can be no freedom without education.” Citing specific examples from the text, **(1) discuss** this concept and **(2) examine** how Douglass is a testament to this idea. Then **(3) explain** how this concept can be applied today and **(4) what** we can learn by applying Douglass’ words to a modern day example.

Possible answers for MAKING A ROUGH OUTLINE:

Possible thesis: **Frederick Douglass’s life proves that lack of education can lead to marginalization and this is still happening today with our urban poor and can be seen here in San Francisco.**

Main supporting point: **(1) discuss** how Douglass’ freedom was connected to him becoming educated.

Supporting evidence: He read *The Columbian Orator* and learned of a slave who argued so well his master set him free. He also learned from Sheridan a “bold denunciation of slavery and a vindication of human rights.”

Main supporting point: **(2) examine** how Douglass is a testament to the idea of freedom through education.

Supporting evidence: Through his determination of getting the white neighborhood boys to bring him books, he taught himself to read and eventually gained his own freedom and then fought for the freedom of others throughout his life as a human rights activist.

Main supporting point: **(3) explain** how poorly funded inner-city schools deny freedom to the students who have high rates of drop out, drug use, and incarceration.

Supporting evidence: Use personal knowledge of a news report on students who attended school in San Francisco’s Bayview-Hunter’s Point.

Main supporting point: **(4) what** can we learn? Explain how we have a form of modern-day slavery as the main victims of the underfunded inner-city schools are blacks and Latinos.

Supporting evidence: Use evidence I remember from reading Jonathan Kozol’s book *Savage Inequalities* to prove harmful outcomes of educational inequality and the cycles of poverty it produces.

STEPS TO BREAK DOWN A PROMPT:

- (1) Read the prompt carefully and several times
- (2) Sum up the topic in a few words
- (3) Circle and/or underline the key words
- (4) Identify and count the required steps in the writing task

Prompt—English 100 in-class essay (30 minutes) TOPIC = music file sharing

In his book, Jim Rogers explores the issue of music file sharing on the internet and he looks at how the record companies have tried to sue individuals, web sites, and internet service providers for copyright infringement. **(1) Do** you feel any of these groups should be held financially responsible for sharing music? Why or why not? **(2) Do** you feel anyone is harmed by music file sharing?

Prompt—English 846 midterm (90 minutes) TOPIC = 3 moral/ethical YouTube concerns

Analyzing their book *YouTube*, **(1) describe** three moral or ethical concerns that Jean Burgess and Joshua Green address about YouTube. **(2) What** are the authors' views about these concerns? **(3) Respond to and analyze** each of these concerns giving your opinion on each. Finally, looking at these concerns together, **(4) explain** how you feel this does or should shape the management and future of YouTube.

Prompt—English 110 midterm (75 minutes) TOPIC = use of American characters

J.T. Rogers' play *The Overwhelming* is set during the 1994 Rwandan genocide of the Tutsis by the Hutus. **(1) Examine** why you think the playwright decided to tell this tragic story of an African country through this family of Americans. Also, **(2) why** construct the characters that he did: the middle-aged college professor trying to publish, his 17 year old son who just lost his mother, and his second wife, a writer and an African-American woman? **(3) Examine** how the use of these American characters affect and shape the larger story being told.

Prompt—History 100 practice midterm (75 minutes) TOPIC = ONE significant past event

“History repeats itself.
Has to.
Nobody listens.”

--Steve Turner

A famous maxim says that those who fail to remember and learn from the events of history—economic failures, wars, injustices, strife—are doomed to repeat them. By learning from historical events, by listening to the message of history, a nation or people can avoid repeating the errors of the past. **(1) Identify** one such significant past event that has been covered in the reading, **(2) discuss** its effects and **(3) explain** why we should remember it.

Prompt—English 846 Final exam (2.5 hours) TOPIC = greed and materialism in 3 texts

Select three (3) of the authors and texts we have read this semester and **(1) examine** how each author argues that greed and materialism function in our lives in the U.S. **(2) Explain who** is mainly guilty of greed **(3) and who** is most affected and how. Finally, **(4) explain** what you feel, and **(5) analyze** the larger impact of your views.

Prompt— English 100 Final exam (2.5 hours) TOPIC = activism of 4 authors

(1) Compare the different ways that four of the authors that we have read this semester used activism to change their current system and to bring about social change, and **(2) explain** what we can learn about effective approaches through this comparison. Finally, **(3) argue** which of the four you feel was the most successful as a revolutionary and as you make your case, be sure to define "revolutionary" and "success" according to you, and **(4) explain** the implications and importance of your findings.

Prompt— English 110 Final exam (2.5 hours) TOPIC = pressures women face in 3 texts

(1) Select three (3) of the authors and texts we have read this semester (one poem, one short story, and one play), and **(2) compare** the characters the authors have created in order to examine the pressures women in particular face. **(3) Describe** the gender-based expectations placed on these women and **(4) examine** the impact. Finally, **(5) examine** the connecting patterns that transcend location and time era in regards to the attitudes toward and treatment of women.