



The WRITING CENTER

pfw.edu/writing

PURDUE
UNIVERSITY
FORT WAYNE

Centers for Academic
Success and Achievement



Guide to Writing In-Class Essays

- If allowed, bring a **watch or clock** so that you can keep track of how much time you have to complete the exam. Don't rely on the instructor or proctor to keep time for you, or depend on a clock being present in the testing room.
- If you are allowed to use notes or texts during the test, **make annotations, margin notes, and quick reference signs before the test**. This will help you find what you're looking for without wasting time. Often, students find the most challenging element of an open-book or open-note exam is finding the needed information, and searching for answers causes them to run out of time to complete the exam.
- **Read all of the instructions carefully**. You may not need to answer every question, or you may need to answer in a certain way. Ask your instructor if you're unclear on anything. You don't want to lose points because you interpreted a question incorrectly.
- **Pick out the key terms** in the questions. Common key terms include:
 - **Analyze**: Describe each part, and show how the parts relate to each other and to the whole.
 - **Argue**: Give your perspective and support it with evidence.
 - **Compare**: Describe the object, person, or idea and show how they are similar.
 - **Contrast**: Describe the object, person, or idea and show how they are different.
 - **Define**: Give the details that separates the subject from similar items. If you are defining a word, do not use the word in your definition.
 - **Describe**: Give details about the person, object, or idea.
 - **Discuss**: This general term usually means to analyze, illustrate, and argue.
 - **Explain**: Like discuss, this term also usually means to define, analyze, and illustrate.
 - **Evaluate**: Examine the good and bad points and form an overall judgment.
 - **Illustrate**: Use examples to describe and analyze.
 - **Narrate**: Give details about a sequence of events.
 - **Outline**: List the main ideas and the major details within each idea.
 - **Summarize**: Select the main points and briefly describe them.
 - **Trace**: Starting with the earliest point, describe the subject's progression.
- Don't skip directions that ask you to **use examples, tell why, or offer support**. These are usually key parts of the question; in other words, they're usually going to be worth a lot of the question's points.
- Before you write anything down, **look over the entire test**. Assigned point values are typically clues for how detailed the instructor expects your answer to be— you may wish to answer questions with the highest point value first, and keep from spending more time than necessary on one question.

- Common types of written questions include:

- **Identification:** Typically, 1-3 sentences defining an object, person, event, or idea.
- **Short Answer:** Usually about a paragraph, answering a specific question, supported by examples.
- **Essay:** Multiple paragraphs supporting a main point (thesis statement).

If you understand how many points each type of question is worth, you can figure out how long you should spend answering it and how much detail your professor is likely expecting. For example, if an identification question is worth 5 points and an essay is worth 20 points, your instructor is probably expecting four times as much length, information, and support in the essay as in the identification question, and you should expect to spend four times as long on the essay as the identification question.

- **Make notes on the test or scrap paper.** Jot down whatever will help you remember your ideas so that you will have something written down to refer to if you get stuck later on. Remember, these notes are only for you, so they don't have to make sense to anyone else.
- Even if you feel rushed, take a moment to stop and organize your thoughts. For essay questions, **write a rough outline** that makes sense to you. **Write a thesis statement** — one sentence which sums up your main response to the question. This statement should be clear, direct, and, to help eliminate the chance you're misinterpreting the question and answering the wrong thing, should repeat some of the question's wording. Most instructors do not expect in-class essays to be as coherent and thought-out as a revised out-of-class paper, but you will receive better marks if your essay is organized and has a clear main point. Also, reread the question often as you're writing just to make sure you're staying on track.
- Leave time to **read back through your work and review your exam.** Unless you're told otherwise, it is perfectly acceptable to cross things out, add words and even sentences in the margin—so long as the essay is still legible.
- **Remember to breathe.** Don't panic. If you feel yourself starting to panic, close your eyes and take a deep breath. The goal is to get your point across to your instructor. Think of it as writing to an individual and focus on getting your ideas across to that one person.
- If you're running out of time and don't think you'll be able to finish your answers, **write down the outline you planned to use.** Sometimes instructors will give partial credit if they can see how you planned to respond to the prompt.