

# Writing the In- Class Essay



Brought to you by the NVCC-Annandale  
Reading and Writing Center

# WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES:

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- To understand the steps involved in writing in-class essays
- To be able to “decode” the question so that you answer the question you are given
- To be able to develop a timetable which makes the most sense based on the time allotted for the exam
- To understand what you can do before, during, and after the exam for optimal performance

# What's the Point of This, Anyway?

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Why instructors use in-class essays and what you can do to keep them from getting the best of you

# In- Class Essay Overview

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In- class essays show what you are able to articulate a) without outside help or resources and b) under a time restriction.

Most instructors are concerned with how you convey what you know. They judge this by looking for a clear, concise, well- organized response from you.

# Essay Steps

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1. Read: read the question thoroughly, and then read it thoroughly again.

Many students do not perform as well as they would like on in-class essays *because they do not answer the question they are given.*

2. Understand: be sure you understand the question as it is being asked.

# For Example

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If you are asked to name three ways in which the body *uses water* throughout a given day, then to say, “The body uses water in many ways throughout a day, and that’s why we should drink 6-8 glasses daily,” states a fact, but it does not answer the question.

Saying something related to the answer and saying the answer are two different things. You are saying something related to the answer when you stick to the topic (in this case, water) but you devise your own question (in this case, consumption, not expenditure).

# Essay Steps (continued)

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3. Annotate: sometimes it helps to annotate the question. Annotating the question means making notes about specific keywords or phrases that will help you reword the question until it becomes a question you can understand clearly.
4. Budget: budget your time. Allot time for planning, writing, and reviewing. More on this process to come...

# Essay Steps (continued)

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5. Thesis: develop your thesis statement.

A good thesis should do the following:

1. assert your position (opinion) on a subject
2. be clear, concise, and ARGUABLE
3. provide a preview of how you will arrange (or organize) your ideas.
4. be the statement which unites each sentence in the paper; all topic sentences, therefore, do the work of contributing to the thesis. In this way, the topic sentences are mini-theses, or small portions of your larger, singular argument.



# Essay Steps (continued)

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6. Reasons: think of three or more (unless your professor provides another number) ways to prove your thesis, brainstorm on those reasons, and put them in a logical order. **Keep the order of your reasons consistent** throughout your essay.
7. Topic Sentences: each reason should be represented by at least one paragraph with a strong topic sentence, which works in unison with the thesis.

# Essay Steps (continued)

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8. Draft: Draft the essay with special attention to the question.
9. Outline: If you foresee a time shortage where you will not have time to finish making your points, list out the remainder of your ideas and examples in the form of an outline.
10. Edit and proofread.

# Tips for Decoding the Question You're Asked...

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Look for the **keyword** that tells you **HOW** to go about answering the question:

- ◉ **Analyze:** to divide something into its parts in order to understand it better, then to see how the parts work together to produce the overall pattern. Analyzing a problem may require you to identify a number of smaller problems that are related to the overall problem.
- ◉ **Compare:** to look at the characteristics or qualities of several things and identify their similarities. Instructions to compare things often are intended to imply that you may also contrast them.
- ◉ **Contrast:** to identify the differences between things.
- ◉ **Criticize/Critique:** to analyze and judge something. Criticism can be either positive or negative, as the case warrants. A criticism should generally contain your own judgments (supported by evidence) in addition to whatever authorities you might invoke.

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- ◉ **Define:** to give the meaning of a word or expression. Definitions should generally be clear and concise and conform with other people's understanding of the terms. Giving an example of something sometimes helps to clarify a definition, but giving an example is not in itself a definition.
  - ◉ **Describe:** to give a general verbal sketch or account of something, in narrative or other form.
  - ◉ **Diagram:** to show the parts of something and their relationships in pictorial form, such as a chart. You are usually expected to label the diagram, and you may be asked to explain it in words as well.
  - ◉ **Discuss:** to examine or analyze something in a broad and detailed way. Discussion often includes identifying the important questions related to an issue and attempting to answer these questions. Where there are several sides to an issue, a discussion involved presenting this variety of sides. A good discussion explores as much of the relevant evidence and information on a topic as it can.

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- ◉ **Evaluate:** to judge the worth or truthfulness of something. Evaluation is similar to criticism, but the word evaluate places more stress on the idea of making some ultimate judgment about how well something meets a certain standard or fulfills some specific purpose. Evaluation involves discussing strengths and weaknesses.
  - ◉ **Explain:** to clarify or interpret something. Explanations generally focus on why or how something has come about. Explanations often require you to discuss evidence that may seem contradictory and to tell how apparent differences in evidence can be reconciled.
  - ◉ **Illustrate:** on an essay examination, to give one or more examples of something. Examples help to relate abstract ideas to concrete experience. Examples may show how something works in practice. Providing a good example is a way of showing you know your course material in detail. Sometimes the instruction to illustrate may be asking you to literally draw a diagram or picture. If you're uncertain of the intention, ask the instructor.

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- ◉ **Interpret:** to explain the meaning of something. For instance, in science you may be asked to interpret the evidence of an experiment, that is, to explain what the evidence shows and what conclusions can be drawn from it. In a literature course you may be asked to interpret a poem, that is, to explain what a specific passage or the poem as a whole means beyond the literal meaning of the words.
  - ◉ **Justify:** to argue in support of some decision or conclusion, to show sufficient evidence or reason in favor of something. Whenever possible, try to support your argument with both logical reasoning and concrete examples.
  - ◉ **Label:** to point to and name specific parts of a figure or illustration.
  - ◉ **Narrate:** to tell a story, that is, a series of events in the order in which they occurred. Generally, when you are asked to narrate events, you are also asked to interpret or explain something about the events you are narrating.

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- ◉ **Outline:** to present a series of main points in appropriate order, omitting lesser details. Also, to present some information in the form of a series of short headings in which each major idea is followed by headings for smaller points or examples that fall under it. An outline shows the correct order and grouping of ideas.
  - ◉ **Prove:** to give a convincing logical argument and evidence in support of the truth of some statement. Note, however, that academic disciplines differ in their methods of inquiry and therefore also differ in what they require in statements of proof.
  - ◉ **Relate:** to show the relationship between things. This can mean showing how they influence each other or how a change in one thing seems to depend on or accompany a change in the other. In showing how things relate, it's often a good idea to provide an example.
  - ◉ **Review:** to summarize and comment on the main parts of a problem or a series of statements or events in order. A review question usually also asks you to evaluate or criticize some aspect of the material.

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- **Summarize:** to give information in brief form, omitting examples and details. A summary should be short yet cover all of the most important points.
  - **Trace:** to narrate a course of events. Where possible, you should show connections from one event to the next. Tracing a sequence of events often points to gaps in the sequence that you may need to fill in by logical suppositions about what might link one event to the next.

Tips on answering questions come from:

Gardner, John and A. Jerome Jewler. *Your College Experience: Strategies for Success*. 2nd ed. Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1995.



# Part II: Strategy

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Timetables, Checklists, and Tools You Can Use

# Developing a Timetable

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Planning- 10 minutes for every hour you're given

Drafting- 45 minutes for every hour you're given

Revising/ Editing- 5 minutes for every hour you're given

*Adjust these times according to your test timetables.*

# Checklists

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## Thesis Checklist

1. Is it an arguable point, or does it state a fact? Facts or observations are not the basis for a good thesis statement.
2. Does it convey your purpose, opinion, and attitude?
3. Is it limited to a single idea?
4. Is the idea specific?
5. Is there enough “at stake” to keep a reader interested?

## Editing Checklist

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- Have you provided enough support for each topic sentence? Is the support specific enough?
- Have you provide a variety of evidence types (anecdotal, statistical, hypothetical) when possible?
- Are you sure the paragraph order makes sense?
- Have you formulated thoughtful transitions within and between paragraphs?
- Is your overall point clear?
- Have you read the paper with the reader's experience in mind?

## Proofreading Checklist

- Have you checked your writing for those spelling and grammar pitfalls that typically mar your writing?
- Read each sentence to yourself with a pencil in hand. Are there any places where the language is unclear, vague, or not precise? If so, modify word choice in those instances.

# What you can do...

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## ...Before the Exam

- Give yourself a question to answer in the amount of time you will have to take the real test.
- Go over any notes you may have taken in class concerning test content.
- Go over graded writing assignments. Pay attention to your instructor's comments, and make a "game plan" for applying them to the impending essay exam.
- Get a good night's rest.
- Write for 10-15 minutes before class starts instead of chatting with your friends about the test. Talking to others about tests right before you take them can raise your anxiety levels and make you feel less prepared than you really may be.

# What you can do...

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## ...During the Exam

- Stick to your allotted time allowances for each step of the writing process: planning, drafting, and revising.
- Read the question carefully, and look for the word(s) that indicate HOW you should go about answering the question.
- Develop and prove your thesis.
- Edit and proofread.

# The End

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Thank you. Please continue using our resources in the future.

Written by Nicole Foreman Tong, 2007  
Revised 2009