

Crisis Writing: Preparing for the In-Class Essay¹

DePauw University Writing Center

Crisis writing – in-class essay, final exams – requires that you write under the pressure of time and usually without knowing the essay questions in advance. In spite of these constraints, you need not abandon the writing process with its thinking, planning, drafting, and revising phases. The following suggestions will help you prepare for crisis writing:

Before exam day

Anticipate questions by reviewing lecture notes, prior exams and essays (as well as your instructor’s comments on them). Also scan your text for information/ideas/topics that play a role in lectures, class discussion, and homework assignments.

It is important to anticipate questions by actually writing them down. Too often students think that “going over” their notes will result in understanding course content. “Going over” notes is not enough. Instead, think analytically and critically about what questions you think the teacher is likely to ask. *Brainstorm potential essay questions and then formulate answers to them.* Make an outline. Write the essay that would answer that question. Use your notes and texts for specific details. This exercise is less about guessing which question you will be asked than it is about reviewing content and examples that will help you write thoughtful responses to a variety of questions.

When the exam is distributed

Study the essay question(s) carefully and select the one(s) you can answer best. If there are several essay questions and you are stuck on the first one, move on to the next. Ideas for the first question may flow more smoothly when you return to it.

Underline each key point of the question(s) to be sure you will cover it entirely. A question only partially answered will give you only partial credit, and oftentimes no credit at all. At the same time, look for key words that tell you what to do (e.g. compare, contrast, describe, analyze) and instructions that reflect those key words:

The Congress recently enacted a child-care bill that is the subject of much debate. Discuss that debate, where you stand, and what changes, if any, you would make to the bill.

As you can see, this is a 4-part question that requires you to:

- a. **summarize** the bill briefly
- b. **compare and contrast** the two (or more) viewpoints
- c. **discuss** your point of view, justifying it with reasons
- d. **describe** changes you might make to the bill

¹ Adapted from California Lutheran University Writing Center handout; used with permission of M.C. Markman.

Plan your essay(s) carefully before you begin to write. Develop a thesis that will guide you through your response and organize your ideas. Your thesis statement should answer all parts of the question. Some planning methods include:

- jotting down questions you might answer
- listing points you will cover, writing an outline
- using a graphic organizer or clustering technique

As you plan, make sure that you cover all aspects of the essay question, and that you **support generalizations with specific references** (evidence/details/examples/authority opinion).

*You wouldn't take a trip without a map, so don't write without a plan.
The results too often produce a wandering, unfocused, even self-contradictory essay.*

Begin writing with a clear thesis statement. Timed writings leave little room for anecdotal or lengthy openings that point the way to the thesis. As you write, refer to your thesis and notes to be sure that you cover all of your points. Consider, too, underlining or enumerating key points (1, 2, 3, or First, Second, Third) to emphasize ideas for an instructor who will read through a stack of exams.

Look at the clock to be sure you are within your time allotment.

Remember: **What** you write and **how** you express yourself are equally important. Consider organization, usage, grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Make sure that your ideas flow smoothly from one to another, are linked together by transitions, and that the whole essay grows out of your thesis.

Allow time to revise and proofread your essay, reading it through the eyes of your instructor. Do not hesitate to make corrections, delete sentences (even paragraphs), or insert a note that will lead your instructor to an addition on another page. Instructors allow for corrections in timed writings and appreciate your attention to revision.

Adapted from:

Crews, Frederick. The Random House Handbook, Fifth Edition. New York: Random House, 1987.

Sample Essay Question:

In "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King Jr. writes: "Privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily." Write an essay in which you explain:

- What he means by that statement in the context of his "Letter"
- How the statement is reflected in other writings we have studied
- The statement's relevance in contemporary America
- Your prognosis for the future with respect to this statement