

Writing under Pressure: Midterms, Finals, and Other In-Class Writing

Adapted from: Elbow, Peter and Pat Belanoff. *A Community of Writers: A Workshop Course in Writing*, 3rd Edition. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2000. Print.

1. **Read the question carefully.** The most common cause of low grades on exams and other assignments is neglecting or misunderstanding the question. Ask yourself questions like these:

- What is the instructor really asking? What is the essential question?
- Is there more than one question or a question behind this question?
- What does the question *assume* or *imply*?

It's fine to question the question and go behind it to talk of something not explicitly mentioned in it – as long as you show you have really understood the question and that your approach is a way of getting to the heart of the matter.

2. **Make an outline.** If you know what you want to say, go right to a one-step outline. If you aren't sure what you want to say, then you need a two-step outline. [Both outlines are explained later in this hand-out.] In either case, make sure that each item in your outline is a *sentence*, not just a word or phrase.

Do this:

I'll compare speech and writing.
Audience is a big factor.
In speaking audience is live in front of us (usually).
In writing, the audience is usually absent.
Therefore, in speaking we usually feel the audience more; we fit words to them better.
In writing, we often don't feel the audience and don't fit words to them or we forget about their point of view.

Not this:

Speech/writing
Audience
Speech Audience
Writing Audience
Effects

→ ***Your goal is not an abstract, static structure, but a moving story of thinking—thinking that leads your reader on a path from the question to your conclusions. Sentences help you feel the logic and movement of your train of thought.***

When you write any outline, leave some space between items so that later you can put in points you realize you need at various spots.

a. **One-step outline** – If you have a pretty good sense of your direction, jump right in and start making the sentence outline we describe above.

→ Make sure you are using the outline to focus on one main, overarching point. A main point doesn't have to be a simple point. For example, your main point could be that there are three important causes/influences/results, or that two opposite arguments are equally valid.

→ As you are taking that path toward your main point, give your readers some hints about the main point. Don't let them feel lost.

b. **Two-step outline** – If you aren't sure what you are going to say, you need two steps.

1. Preoutline

→ Write down every point you can think of that somehow seems to pertain to this question. Write your points down in whatever order they pop into your mind.

→ Try for sentences or assertions, not just single words or phrases that don't say anything.

→ Once you have your list, check the exam question again and then your list of points. Perhaps the process of reading over all the points you put down will help you see a main point you haven't yet written down. But even if that doesn't happen, you should now be able to see which points are primary and which are secondary.

2. Outline

→ Put your points in an order that tells a story, an order that leads your reader on a clear path from the question to your answer.

→ There are always various interesting and valid paths. Feel yourself not so much trying to solve a problem in geometry as trying to find a good story to tell.

3. Write out your essay.

→ If you are writing by hand, write on every other line so that you can come back and make additions or corrections.

→ Don't agonize over small details of wording. Get yourself *talking to the page*, rather than trying to construct grammatical sentences. This talking will lead to some informality in your wording, but that's perfectly acceptable in most exams.

→ Don't spend much time thinking about spelling either.

→ Make sure you save some time at the end to go back over what you've written and make a few corrections in mechanics.

→ Follow your outline and make sure to give your readers lots of "signposts" to identify your structure. Try to help readers feel the logic of your train of thinking with signpost words like "in addition," "moreover," "however," "on the other hand," and "you might think so and so, but really, it's thus and such."