

Tips for Writing Well on Essay Tests

1. **Warm up beforehand by writing something.** We all perform better after we get in the rhythm.
2. **Get excited.** The easiest way to do this is to say something that matters to you, and to write directly to someone with the intent to stir him. (Yes, some test topics do make this difficult.)
3. **Be specific.** If your test answer is two sentences long, make the first a thesis and the second an example.
4. **Take a moment to prewrite.** A few minutes spent planning will usually pay for themselves by giving you a sense of direction early.
5. **Get on with it.** Make sure your first sentence gets to the heart of things. Skip leisurely introductions. Never repeat yourself.
6. **Write in your own language.** It takes time to translate your writing into someone else's style, time you don't have.
7. **Write only one draft.** You don't have time to rewrite. If you write a few lines and then change your mind, just cross them out and keep going.
8. **Be aware of the time.** An unfinished good essay is worse than a finished ok essay.
9. **Proofread for garbled meaning.** Writing quickly almost guarantees you'll omit important words, such as "not."
10. **If mechanics (such as punctuation) matter on this test, proofread for mechanics by checking for mistakes you commonly make.**

ALWAYS

- **Do what the instructor wants.** If she's asking a question just to see how much you know, a thesis is irrelevant and possibly a handicap. If she's checking to see how well you've done the reading, no matter how brilliant your essay, if you fail to cite the reading, you lose.
Instructor's purposes in giving a test may not be self-evident; the only way to find out what they are is to ask. Before taking a test, you might want to know:
Is there a right answer? Or are you being judged just on the quality of your argument?
Does style or mechanics (like spelling) count?
Does the instructor want to see you use the jargon of the course?
Is this in part a check to see if you've done the reading?
- **Follow directions slavishly.** With tests, this is especially tricky, because text questions tend to be lots of little, specific tasks, and as you write your way into the essay, it takes on a life of its own and you forget exactly what you set out to do. One solution is to itemize and number the instructions at the outset, and reread them halfway through the essay.
- **Structure to help the instructor read and grade your essay quickly.** Structure rigidly, conservatively, and blatantly. Outlining is strongly recommended. Have a thesis and state it up front. Let the instructor see when you're doing each assigned task (such as defining, contrasting, giving reasons). Consider numbering your tasks on the page.

Adapted from Jack Rawlins. *The Writer's Way*. 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996. 449-451.