

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

There are two kinds of pressure that often make writing difficult. Most of us have experienced both kinds: (1) writing when you have sharply limited time, such as when you are taking an exam, and (2) writing when you are anxious or confused and therefore can't think straight.

Writing When You Have Limited Time

In this textbook we stress writing as a complex process of thinking something through: Start by exploring and only gradually work your way through to the point where you finally understand what you want to say. Invite chaos and then work gradually toward coherence. Clarity of mind is not what you start out with but what you end up with. This is indeed the best way to get to new thinking and to your best thinking, and to produce writing that is the most intellectually alive.

But this long and messy process is a luxury you can't afford when you have only 30 or 60 minutes for writing an essay on an exam. If you have a longer essay exam of two or three hours, you can invite a little of this process, but not much. There's a technological issue here too; if you can write your exam on a computer, you can do more revising than if you have to write by hand.

When time is short, and especially if you are writing by hand, you need to start off establishing clarity of mind. We suggest the following steps:

Read the Question Carefully Slowly. Repeatedly. The most common cause of low grades on exams and other assignments is neglecting or misunderstanding the question. Unless the exam question is extremely simple and straightforward, you need to take yourself in hand and force yourself to think hard about what is being asked. It's best to jot things down for a couple of minutes. Ask yourself questions like these:

- What is the instructor really asking? What's 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 that you have really understood the question and that your approach is a way of getting to the heart of the matter.

Make an Outline If you know pretty much what you want to say on the basis of your pondering of the question, you can go right to a one-step outline. If you find the question difficult and you can't yet see what you want to say, then you need a two-step outline. We'll explain both approaches in a minute.

In either case, make sure it's an "explicit outline"; that is, make sure that each item in your outline is an *assertion*, not simply a point; a *sentence*, not just a word or phrase. Just listing points, words, or phrases may be quicker and easier—like this:

- Speech/writing
 - Audience
 - Speech audience
 - Writing audience
 - Effects

But this kind of *nonexplicit* outline doesn't spell out your thinking clearly enough and can often get you lost or confused. It's worth forcing yourself to write actual sentences. It's fine for them to be simple—that's even better—and it's okay to skip some words. But make each one feel like it's saying something or doing work, not just pointing in a direction. 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*. Here's an example:

- I'll compare speech and writing.
- Audience is a big factor.
- In speaking, audience is live in front of us (usually).
- In writing, 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.

Some people don't think you can have an outline unless there is *indenting*. But the point is to make your list of sentences tell a story of thinking that works without the aid of indenting. 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.

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. But make sure you are using the outline to focus on one main, overarching point.

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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. In addition, the *path* to your single main point doesn't have to be simple; you can treat a number of subissues and side controversies to build up to your single main point. But 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. In short, most teachers are looking for what most good thinkers are looking for—both simplicity and complexity. They'll mark you down if it's merely simple, and they'll mark you down if it's complex but confusing.

Two-Step Outline If you aren't sure yet what you are going to say, you need two steps.

The first step is a preoutline or proto-outline—a kind of “grab bag” nonoutline: 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. Again, try for sentences or assertions, not just single words or phrases that don't say anything.

Once you have your list of ideas or assertions—once you have quickly jotted down every point or idea you can think of that pertains to the question—then you have arrived at the moment of decision. 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. That's an exciting development. But even if that doesn't happen, you should now be able to see which points are primary and which are secondary.

Now you can go to the second step and make your real 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.

If you find this process difficult, don't frustrate yourself by assuming that you have to find the single, perfect train of thought or path. 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.

Writing 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 worry about using up a lot of paper. Writing on alternate lines is also easier for teachers to read—which is an important factor.

This may be more or less one-draft writing where you can't simply freewrite garbage. But don't agonize over small details of wording. The best method is to get yourself *talking onto 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. And don't spend much time thinking about spelling either. Just 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. (Here are some examples of the kinds of sentences or

phrases that help save readers from getting lost: "In this essay I will be making one main argument, but to back it up, I need to consider two side issues." "My first point is this." "My last point might seem surprising but it is as follows." "I see a disagreement between two ideas that many people think are in agreement.") Don't run away from blunt, even clumsy phrasings that spell out what you are doing. 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."

Writing When You Can't Think Straight

We often have to write a paper even though something in our life has derailed us: Someone we care about is ill or has jilted us, and we are seething with hurt or anger. There are many situations that can short-circuit our brain.

The most obvious solution is to put the writing task aside for a while and let the circuits reestablish themselves—to allow the mind to heal. Take a hike and let a day or two pass. But if there's not much time, the most curative activity is to get a trusted friend to listen while we talk about everything that has upset us. Make it clear that his or her job is to listen and be supportive, not trying to think of answers or cures for our problem. If we speak and our friend listens supportively, we can usually find the perspective we need to put our upset aside for a while. Indeed, the process often shows us how to deal with the situation.

If such a friend is not available, *create* a friend out of blank paper. Simply freewrite about what has upset you. Spill your feelings on paper. This too will usually help you to clear your mind and feelings and to feel fresh again.

But what if you are still having trouble thinking clearly? Perhaps the paper is due tomorrow morning. It's 1:30 A.M. now, no friends are awake to listen to you spout off, you've tried freewriting for two 15-minute sessions—and you still can't think straight. The problem is that your upset is causing your mind to have trouble holding on to more than one thought at a time. When you try to think two thoughts or think about a connection between two or three ideas—especially if you try to create a train of thought—your mind shuts down. This happens to all of us.

The best help for writing under these conditions comes from the two-step outline. Start with the "grab bag" nonoutline process and write down every point that you can think of that pertains to your topic. Don't write them on a piece of paper. Instead get a pile of cards or cut up pieces of 8½-by-11-inch paper into eighths and write each point on a separate card or slip of paper. Write them as they come to you—in any order. That way, you only have to think one thought at a time. But try to make each one a sentence, not just a word or phrase.

After you've written out this pile of thoughts, lay out the slips around you and begin to group them together according to your feeling of which ones "sort of go together." In effect, you are now moving gradually into the second step of creating an outline.

Next, choose the one that appeals to you. Write it out (all your clump goes to the top). Write it out (all your clump goes to the top).

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Next, choose one clump of cards or slips of paper—perhaps the one that appeals to you most—and gradually coax your mind into figuring out why this clump goes together. In effect, you are trying to feel the idea in each clump. Write it out (if you have not already done so) on one of the cards. Do this for all your clumps.

Next, try for sequence. Try to feel which clumps or main ideas go before or after the others. Again, remember you aren't doing geometry or algebra, you are trying to tell a story—a story of thinking.

As you are working out a sequence and a story, figure out your main, overall point. Make sure to write that out too on a slip or card. Once you've written out a one-sentence main point, look back at your sequence or story and make sure it fits your main point. You may make changes in the sequence of your cards or slips of paper, but you're not aiming for perfection. Given your fragile state of mind, you are trying to get by with something acceptable or decent.

Notice the process you have been using. You are upset and your mind cannot hold onto more than one idea at a time or think about relationships among ideas. Therefore, you give your mind a break by using a simple calculating machine that consists of movable slips of paper. Throughout the process, your mind never has to deal with more than one thought.

Now you know pretty much what you are going to say and pretty much the order for saying it. You are in a position to start writing your draft. See if you can take some time away from your paper at this point to clear your head before you try to write out a draft. Even a half hour can help.

Writing out a Draft Even though you are probably feeling much better now, you may well find it difficult to write clear, well-constructed sentences. Give yourself permission to write ugly, ungainly, absurd, broken *nonsentences*. The goal is to get your thoughts into "sort-of prose." It's fine to use sentences like these: "I'm not sure, but it seems like . . ." "Here's something that I want to say: . . ." Try to talk your thinking onto paper; the more you can talk it, the easier time you'll have.

As you are writing, don't get stopped or tangled trying to fix sentences or stymied by fussing over a grammar or usage problem. Keep slogging forward. Keep following your outline and writing out your thinking. It will probably get better.

Again, clear your head with a short break that will distance you a bit from your language and help you examine it more objectively. After you have a draft of the whole thing, you'll be surprised how easy it is to go back through it to clarify and clean up the language. Your best tool is your voice, using your actual mouth and throat. Force yourself to speak every phrase and sentence aloud. As you do so, you'll find it easy and natural to change words and phrases so that they fit more comfortably in your mouth. Keep in mind that there is usually no need for complete rephrasing or rewriting: The sentence often becomes strong and comfortable if you just omit many of the words you used earlier as you were fighting to produce "sort-of prose."

You might find it helpful to take another tiny break so you can come back to check the spelling, punctuation, and grammar with fresher eyes.

Exercise: Practicing the Technique

So far in this mini-workshop, we have just been explaining general processes. Now we urge you to practice these activities. You'll find it easier to use them under exam conditions or when you are upset and anxious if you try them out under safer conditions first. You need to get the feel of them. Try following the steps we have proposed, but if it helps you to make some adjustments, that's fine. Your goal should be to mold *our* processes to *your* needs.

Set yourself a deadline of a half hour or one hour to write a practice essay exam. Choose a topic where you'll have to struggle a bit to figure out what you want to say. That is, choose a topic that forces you to use the two-step outline process. See if you can find one that is both meaty and difficult for you—choose a topic where you don't yet know your thinking so that you will have to fight your way to a new train of thought. Perhaps your textbook lists questions at the ends of units. Here are a few topics we can suggest:

- Think of two or three different courses, subjects, or disciplines that interest you. Perhaps they are possible majors for you. Compare and contrast the ways of thinking, the assumptions, and the values in these fields.
- Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of traditional gender-role upbringing for men and women doing careers in science.
- Describe an opinion, attitude, or point of view that seems highly valued in our culture—and one about which you have divided feelings. You see the value in it, yet you have misgivings too. Write an essay in which you try to clarify your thinking on this matter.
- In comparing humans to (other) animals, what is more important—the ways they differ or the ways they are the same or similar?

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