

# Strategies for Writing Under Pressure

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## Understand the question

**FACT:** *The biggest reason students fail essay exams is that they simply don't answer the question.*

To successfully answer an essay question or to successfully respond to a writing prompt, first you must understand the question. To do this, look for CUE words and KEY words.

- **CUE WORD**—a word of direction that tells what the content of your answer is expected to emphasize. The cue word tells you *how* to answer the question. Examples of cue words include: *analyze, clarify, classify, compare and contrast, criticize, define, describe, discuss, evaluate, explain., illustrate, interpret, justify, prove, relate, review, show, summarize, and support.*
- **KEY WORD**—a word that tells you the information, topics, and ideas you are to write about. Each essay question may have one or more key words.

Look at this Example: *Criticize the architectural function of the modern football stadium.*

In the above example, “criticize” is the cue word and “architectural function” and “football stadium” are the key words. To answer the question successfully, you must first define the term *architectural function*; then describe the typical modern football stadium; and then discuss how well the typical modern football stadium fits your definition of architectural function.

## Budget your time

Know how much time you have to complete the essay and budget your time from the beginning to allow for all stages of the writing process. Typically, you should allocate your time as follows:

- **PLANNING (10%)**—Planning includes analyzing and understanding the question, considering your audience and purpose, doing some quick brainstorming, and creating your timetable.
- **GENERATING CONTENT (40%)**—Generating content includes developing your thesis, coming up with reasons for that thesis, analyzing your reasons and possible opposition to your reasons, and then revising the thesis to reflect that analysis. It also includes creating an outline to work from as you create your draft.
- **REVIEW/REVISE (50%)**—Fill in your outline making sure to provide logical transitions between your ideas. Read your draft for missing connections. Fill in any gaps. Proofread and edit. Be sure to save at least 10% of your total time for proofreading. It should not be overlooked. It doesn't take too long but can make a huge difference in your grade.

## Follow your writing process

Follow entire writing process when writing under pressure. Don't cut any steps out; just compress your schedule to work within your time constraints.

1. Read and understand the task.
2. Prewrite/brainstorm some ideas.
3. Write a clear and simple thesis statement (restating the prompt).
4. Create an outline for your essay (be sure to include specific details and examples, not just abstractions).
5. Work from your outline, filling it in to create full paragraphs. Make sure that each idea (paragraph) is logically connected to the next. Fill in the gaps.
6. Revise. (This is absolutely critical.)
7. Proofread and edit. (Always save time for this.)