

Under Pressure:

Timed Writing as a Tool for Showing Off

So here's the deal: studies show that tests and timed writings are actually really terrible tools for evaluating the knowledge and understanding of information. Many people in America suffer from crippling test anxiety that often renders them incapable of expressing their knowledge or ideas. You could look at a midterm or a quiz and decide that it is evil and therefore should be destroyed, or you could see it as an opportunity to surprise your professor by working your brain.

Look at it this way: most professors, in response to tests and timed essays, get two types of students: apathetic and anxious. Apathetic students have given up before the game started and anxious students have felt that failure is so imminent that they will stay up all night to avoid its eager jaws.

How do we avoid this terrible monster of a tool, which has become so ingrained in our education system that it permeates nearly every discipline? We master the skills necessary to massacre every test and essay put before us.

Skills we need to make timed writing more like timed showing off than timed water-boarding:

- Prompt dissection
 - o Look for the parts of a prompt. **Introduction, main question, and qualifying requirements** are the basic parts
 - o Introduction is background; it could be a quote, a definition, or a narrative, and usually isn't something you have to examine in your essay (though you can!).
 - o The main question identifies the primary goal of your essay. It should answer this as thoroughly and promptly as possible.
 - o The qualifying requirements discuss length, outside resources, format, or even style and organization concerns. Read them, but try not to focus on them. They're the first things to go insofar as flexible grading is concerned.
- Brainstorming
 - o Being able to quickly and effectively organize thoughts and start our brain really working is key to beginning the actual writing process.
 - o Start with what you think is your strongest answer to the question asked.
 - o Write down as many of your facts as possible and decide where it goes.
- Follow-through
 - o Actually express all of your ideas. The key to this is remembering that most professors will not count off for too much or irrelevant information; they will simply disregard it. Don't be worried that you're saying too much. You can really only be penalized for saying too little.
- Focus
 - o Don't lose sight of the prompt. Always remember that your essay is geared toward answering a very specific question. Answer it and move on.
 - o Remind yourself every once in a while what your purpose is. Throughout your writing process, re-read the prompt. It keeps your mind on the prize.
- Necessary study skills
 - o Obviously, you need to pay attention in class and read any assign material.

- If you have some idea of the topic of the prompt beforehand, trying to learn all you can about this topic. The more you know, the more options for evidence you have.
- Look for overarching themes of the class or discipline. Women's studies courses focus on patriarchy, rape culture, and sexism; theatre courses discuss trends in costume and scenic design development, the rise of Realism, and acting specialties. English courses look at character development, social commentary, and bias. If you can tie your topic in with a theme of a course, your professor will realize that you don't just know things about the topic—you have actually given active thought to the academic goals they're trying to reach.

Happy Writing!

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