

Teaching Solutions

Peak Performance Test Taking Strategies

*“How to Maximize Your Test Effectiveness,
& Write a Winning Essay”...*

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Introduction

“A hundred cartloads of anxiety will not pay an ounce of debt.”
Italian proverb

There are few events in life more scary than an exam. Your wedding might be stressful, moving house might drive you up the wall, but nothing compares to the downright fear that an exam can instill in even the brightest and most prepared of students.

You could have spent the last four years slogging through hundreds of books and writing dozens of papers. You might have given up every weekend since you started college to make sure you got the best grades possible. But unless you perform well on that one day, for those few hours, all your hard work—and all your career goals—are going to go straight down the tubes.

That’s pressure.

And of course the pressure makes everything so much worse. You don’t sleep properly, you spend more time worrying than preparing, and when you walk into the exam room, you panic—and fail.

Unless, of course, you prepare for the exam properly.

In this guide, we’ll tell you everything you need to know to make it safely through the build-up and into the exam room.

In the first section, we’ll explain how to prepare both your mind and your body. We’ll tell you how much sleep to get, how to use stress, and how to motivate yourself when you really don’t feel like hitting the books again.

In the next section, we’ll teach you how to organize your work, how to cram if you need to, and what you should be doing on the last few days before the test.

Finally, in the last section, we’ll take you into the exam room and reveal some truly fantastic tips that will help you ace the test even when you don’t know the answer!

Let’s start where every successful test begins: with your mind and your body.

1. Mind And Body

Exams are intended to test your knowledge of a body of information. They're supposed to give an indication of whether you have the intelligence and skills needed to perform a particular job. They may do that. But mostly they show how well you do tests.

The fact is, you can know everything there is to know about your subject and have a brain the size of a small planet. But if you panic, lose focus or fail to get to grips with the material, you're going to fail.

Good test-taking begins in the mind.

There are three foundations to good exam preparation: sleep, motivation and stress control.

Sleep

Many students work hard. Some certainly play hard. Most like to think they can both work hard and play hard.

Here's the bad news.

Playing hard ruins hard work.

Carlyle Smith, a professor of psychology at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario, researched the effects of sleep deprivation on learning. He taught student volunteers a complex logic game and had them memorize a list of paired words.

One group of the volunteers was then deprived of sleep that night; a second group was deprived of sleep the following night; a third group was deprived of sleep on the third night; and the remaining group was given three full night's rest.

What Prof. Smith found was that a week later, those volunteers deprived of sleep on the first and third nights after learning performed 30 percent less well at the logic game than the students who slept well. (Oddly, volunteers who were deprived sleep on the second night performed as well as the ones who slept fully.)

What does that mean in practice?

If you study all week and party all night Friday, you'll lose 30 percent of what you learned on Wednesday and Friday. Party on Saturday night and you'll lose 30 percent of Thursday too.

The bottom line is that once you start revising for the exam, you can kiss goodbye to late nights and wild evenings.

That doesn't mean you can't enjoy yourself or blow off steam. You should. Go for a run, play soccer, meet your pals for coffee and a meal. But make sure you get a good eight hours of sleep each night.

Cut back in favor of a good time and you might just as well have slept through a third of your workday.

Motivation

Of course, everyone begins their exam preparation with good intentions. Everybody wants to pass and get high grades. But there inevitably comes a time when you just can't look at the books again. You're so fed up with the sight of calculus or French vocabulary or whatever it is that you're studying that you will do anything—even the dishes—as long as it doesn't involve remembering rules or memorizing words.

That's why when the phone rings and a friend invites you out for coffee, it's so difficult to say no.

But you have to—when the time isn't right.

Motivating yourself to study is one of the hardest aspects of exam preparation. It's also one of the most important. As soon as you lose the motivation to study, you can kiss your career goal goodbye.

Fortunately, regardless of how long your run-in to test day, you can keep motivation with a mixture of rewards, punishments and fear.

First, set yourself a realistic schedule.

Tell yourself that you're going to read Egyptian History from nine to twelve and then take an hour's break. When you're done, toss the books aside, buy yourself a giant lunch or blast aliens on your Playstation for sixty minutes. The important thing is to do something that gives you pleasure and pushes the pain of studying out of your mind for a while.

But don't think about your reward while you're studying.

This is crucial. If you've ever tried to motivate yourself in the past with a reward, you've probably found that you spend all your time dreaming about the fun you're about to have and not concentrating on the task at hand.

Forget about what you're going to do. Just tell yourself you're going to do something you'll enjoy. Then try to surprise yourself by flicking on the television or calling up a friend. Be impulsive. Don't plan your reward, or you'll spend all your time planning and no time preparing.

But you should think about your punishment.

You're much less likely to waste valuable revision time dreaming about the extra work you're going to have to do in your downtime than fantasizing about meeting your mate in the evening.

Tell yourself that if you don't get to grips with molecular chemistry by the end of the day, you'll have to forget about playing soccer tomorrow. Imagine yourself sitting inside while your pals are running around scoring goals.

And make sure you understand that you mean it. Inflicting punishment on yourself requires discipline, but once you've had to spend a couple of evenings at home studying while your pals were out enjoying themselves, you'll soon find yourself with greater motivation to move forward.

Finally, nothing motivates more than fear.

The reason you're putting yourself through this torture now is that you have to. Taking an exam is the only way to become a lawyer, doctor, manager, scuba instructor or whatever it is that you want to do.

Fail the exam and you can't do it.

Try to imagine yourself pumping gas for the rest of your life, or working in your local shoe store. Every time you feel your enthusiasm flagging, remind yourself why you're doing this—and what will happen if you don't!

Stress

Stress is the big bugbear of exam preparation. It can make you irritable, ill, tired and generally impede your progress. In the exam room itself, a certain amount of nerves can help you focus and move faster. In the build-up to the exam though, stress is an obstacle you must clear.

First, you'll need to know what stress looks like. Stress symptoms include exhaustion, changes in appetite, headaches, crying, sleeplessness and even oversleeping. Some people try to escape through alcohol, drugs or other compulsive behavior. Feelings of alarm, frustration or apathy often accompany stress.

Stress might have physical symptoms, but ultimately stress starts in the mind—and you can beat it there.

It is possible to manage your environment and your workload in such a way that you keep stress out. You can do breathing exercises and organize your workload. Perhaps most importantly, you can say 'no' when someone tries to dump more work on you.

Here are 5 ways to smack down stress:

1. Set realistic goals

It might be nice to get everything done in the first week and spend the rest of your time practicing exam papers, but when you don't meet your deadline, you'll kill your motivation. Plan carefully—but plan realistically.

2. Don't sweat the small stuff

Not all subjects and tasks are equally important. Prioritize your work and get the big ones behind you as soon as possible. You'll quickly build up confidence.

3. Work it off

Revision is sedentary work. You're going to spend hours doubled over books focused on dull subjects. It's no wonder you're going to feel up-tight! Make sure that physical exercise is part of your rewards. You'll be able to toss out all that tension.

4. Take micro-breaks

At the end of every hour, give yourself a five-minute micro-break. Step outside, pour some coffee, practice yoga, but don't work straight through. You'll tire, lose focus, and as you waste time, feel even more stressed.

5. Use stress to motivate you

If you can't fight what's bothering you and you can't flee from it, flow with it. Let stress be the motivator that drives your exam preparation. If you're worried that you're not getting to grips with trigonometry, buckle down and get it under your belt—you'll feel a lot better!

2. Material Preparation

Putting your mind and body in the right frame is important, but it won't get you through the exam. The only way to get a top grade in any exam is to know the stuff the exam tests.

Good exam preparation means getting your material organized on paper—and in your head.

Get Organized

To do well on tests you first have to get organized. A day spent sorting out your notes and putting your work in order before you start revising will save you a week of stress and a ton of lost details later.

You'll find it much easier to remember your notes when they're in a logical order.

Begin by plowing through all your notes and making a list of all the sections and the topics you'll need to revise.

Next, estimate how long each section will take you to review. Bear in mind that you'll probably want a day to go over everything once, a few hours to review each section, and finally, you'll need time at the end for practice tests.

Be realistic in your expectations. You'll feel much more confident if you can finish your preparation ahead of schedule—and much more stressed if you find time dribbling away with work still not done.

And when you do draw up your timetable, don't forget to leave room for breaks and rest periods. All work and no play doesn't just make Jack a dull boy—it makes him panic, forgetful and fail the exam. Put in ten minutes at the end of each hour to poke your head out the window and breathe some fresh air before you dive back in.

By the time you reach the last week of your revision period (or the last few days, depending on how many exams you have), you should have all the information folded in your head. But that doesn't mean it's all really there. Save time at the end to try to guess the questions and test yourself with practice papers.

Your organization schedule should look something like this:

First Day:

Planning

Review all material. Place everything in order to make sure nothing's missing. You can give yourself an entire day to do this. It should give you an overview of the subject as well as a list of revision topics.

Middle Days

Revision

Review your work, topic by topic. You could do two subjects in the morning and three in the afternoon or the other way around. Everybody works differently, and everyone likes to work at different times. Find the schedule that suits you best and be prepared to shift it around if you find it's not working.

Last Days

Testing

In the army, before a team go on a mission, they practice their moves time and time again. You should take the same approach with your exam. Try to predict what will come up and test yourself constantly. Get it right and your exam will be a breeze.

Memory Techniques

Most of what you do in those middle days of revision will be memorizing. It doesn't matter whether you're studying Anglo Saxon Literature or Astronomy, there's going to be a huge amount of material that you'll be expected to pack into your brain ready to spill onto the exam.

For many people, this is the worst part of exam preparation. They believe that they have memories like sieves and it doesn't matter how often they repeat something, nothing will remain in their head long enough to last until the exam.

Let's be clear: memorizing huge chunks of data is simply a matter of technique. Anyone can do it. If you know how, you can memorize the entire phone book. It's nothing to do with brainpower, ability or the amount of information you need to know.

There are five main methods you can use to keep your info in your head.

1. Acronyms and Acrostics

These are dead useful when you need to remember keywords.

An acronym is an invented combination of letters in which *each letter* is a cue to an idea you need to remember. For example, BRASS is an acronym for how to shoot a rifle: **B**reath, **R**elax, **A**im, **S**ight, **S**queeze.

An acrostic is a sentence in which the *first letter of each word* is a cue to an idea you need to remember. For example: EVERY GOOD BOY DESERVES FUN is an acrostic to remember the order of G-clef notes on sheet music: E, G, B, D, F.

2. The Method of Loci

This can be a fun method when you've got a list of about twenty items—especially people—that you need to remember.

Select any location that you spend a lot of time in and know intimately. It could be your parent's home, your local bar or anywhere you know by heart. Then choose a

number of sites in that location (maybe the first bar stool, the pool table, the pinball machine etc.) Make sure you have them in order, so that as you walk through the location, you'd have to pass each one in turn.

Finally, place each item or person in one of those sites in the location.

For example, let's say you needed to remember the kings and queens of England from 1066 onwards. You could make the William the Conqueror the doorman, pass William II on your way in, squeeze between Henry I and Stephen to order a drink from Eustace, and try not to spill it on Matilda as you turn around. You can make a whole plot-line in your head and it would be lot easier to keep there than a list of names.

3. The Keyword Method

Keywords are a standard method of memorizing vocabulary. It makes studying foreign languages a breeze.

Essentially, you want to draw a link between the word and its meaning.

For example, let's say you needed to remember that *voiture* means 'car' in French. The second half of the word sounds like 'tour' so we know we're traveling, and the 'v' at the beginning can make us think of 'vehicle'. Imagine a car, a touring vehicle, stuck in traffic in Paris, and you've got an image you can remember that will make it easy to retain the word.

4. The Image-Name Technique

This is a technique you can use to remember names. (It's very handy at parties!)

The idea is to create a name and the physical characteristics of the person you're trying to remember. Nixon, for example, is famous for looking unshaved in his television debate against Kennedy. Imagine that he didn't want to shave because he didn't want to have 'nicks on' his face, then picture his chin covered in sticking plaster, and you've got an easier way to remember his name.

In general, the more bizarre the image, the easier it will be to remember the name.

5. Chaining

Chaining is another good way to remember a list of unrelated items. The idea is simply to create a connection between each one.

For example, let's say you needed to remember Yalta, Potsdam, Churchill, Stalin and curtain. You could create a story about Barbra Streisand ('Yente') smoking pot and swearing, while Churchill and Stalin watch her from behind a curtain. It's not very likely to happen, but it's also not very likely that you'll forget it!

Cramming: Last Minute Preparation

The amount of time you give yourself to prepare for an exam will depend on how many exams you have and the level of your workload. Ideally, you should give yourself as much time as possible.

If you have to cram, you're in trouble.

We'll give you some useful techniques to help you prepare for an exam in just a few days, but there's a limit to what even we can do! If you're only starting to study three days before an exam, don't expect to get a high grade. We're talking damage limitation here, not maximum grades.

First, be realistic. You won't be able to learn everything. Familiarize yourself with larger concepts and review what you already know. You're not going to have time to remember all the details.

Second, organize your time. It doesn't matter how little of it you have, your time will be better spent practicing tests than memorizing facts. Spend 25 percent of your time cramming and 75 percent drilling yourself.

This is what you should be looking to do as exam day approaches:

E-Day Minus Three

Assess where you are—and where you need to be!

Make sure you know what will be covered in the test and what format the test will take. If you haven't even started reading the material yet, you're definitely looking at a cram.

First, draw up an outline of all the material you could be tested on. You *will* need that overview.

Next, try to figure out what the test might contain. Teachers like to see their students do well (it makes them look good) and often drop hints about what will come up. If you've missed any classes, this is the time to call up your pals and make sure you didn't miss a useful exam hint! If you know some things definitely won't come up, cross them off straight away.

Finally, start reviewing!

E-Day Minus Two

Figure out now how much more you can reasonably expect to learn in the next couple of days.

At some point, you'll probably have to cut and run. Make sure you cut the stuff you're least likely to need!

Start taking practice tests.

E-Day Minus One

This is the big memory trick.

By now you should know which pieces of the material are the most important. You're going to need to use all of the memory techniques we discussed earlier to ram the information into your head and keep it there.

E-Day Minus One Night

Before you go to bed, review all the information you've learned one more time.

Do it from memory, without looking at your notes. When you're finished, take a look to see what you missed out and try to find some space in your head to squeeze it in. Whatever is out at the end of the day is going to stay out.

Don't be tempted to stay up all night cramming. Remember, when you don't sleep enough, you lose 30 percent of that day's work. Getting a full eight hours sleep will do far more good than an extra two or three hours of revision.

E-Day!

Wake up early and review your material for the last time.

Your mind should be more alert after a good night's sleep and looking at your notes on the morning of the exam will keep the information fresh.

Do not review immediately before the exam though. You'll get confused, panicky and worry about the things you've forgotten. You'll want to feel confident and on form when you hear the magic words: "Turn the page over and begin."

3. Exam Technique

Exams aren't just tests of knowledge. They're also tests of technique. If you understand how an exam works, you can sometimes forget about all the information you've got packed inside your head—assuming it's there—and find the correct answer faster using the information in the question.

In this section, we'll take you through three common types of exams and explain the secret techniques you can use to max them.

Multiple Choice Questions

Multiple-choice questions, matching, and true/false questions have one thing in common: the correct answer is always provided. All you have to do is identify it.

Many multiple-choice questions contain an incomplete statement (called a 'stem') which may be completed by four or five sentence endings. One of those ending is the correct answer. The others are decoys.

For Example:

The red color of the planet Mars is caused by

- (Decoy) a. quasar pulses*
- (Decoy) b. massive refraction of light*
- (Decoy) c. alien blood*
- (Answer) d. iron dust*

The first thing you'll notice about the answer choices is that grammatically, any one of them could have been right. Slot them in, and linguistically the sentence makes sense. The meaning might raise some eyebrows, but the sentence works.

You can't spot the answer by looking for a broken sentence.

But you can hone in on the answer by knocking out the dumb ones.

On a multiple-choice question, the first thing you should do is read the question and all the answer choices.

Next, **cross out the stupid answers**. The fact is, there is usually at least one option on every multiple-choice question that's way out there. In the example above, 'alien blood' looks very bizarre. (Everyone knows that aliens have green blood.) Cross it off.

Now you have a one in three chance of striking it lucky.

So far, so good. Now **look for options outside your course syllabus**. Often, examiners will throw in an answer choice that totally confuses you. You don't know what it's talking about, but because none of the answer choices look good, you assume that it must be right.

It isn't. It's a decoy.

If you haven't discussed quasars, then quasar pulses (whatever they are) can't be a correct answer in the exam. Now we're down to two. One of them is the right answer.

The last method of identifying decoys is perhaps the most useful. **Obliterate extreme language**. Whenever you see words like "never," "always," "best," "no," "all" or "huge" etc. it's a pretty good sign you're looking at a wrong answer.

You're now down to one answer. You might have never known that Mars is a giant rust ball, but you can still ace your astronomy exam using the right exam techniques.

Here are a few more answer choice give-aways:

The option "all of the above" is usually correct.

When you're given a list and the last answer choice is "all of the above," it's probably right. Give all the choices a quick look to make sure there's nothing bizarre etc., but if they all look good, nine times out of ten, they are.

Numbers in the middle are usually correct.

This is particularly useful in math tests.

Examiners usually provide at least one answer that's too high and one that's too low. If you've got no idea which is right, knock those out first.

Look for look-alike answers.

Examiners can be pretty mean sometimes. They'll often provide two answers that are almost identical to stop you calculating half the sum and guessing or in the hope that you'll get your calculations just a little bit wrong.

It's a low trick, but you can't get your own back. If two answers are almost the same, one is a decoy for the other. Now you've got a fifty-fifty chance of getting the answer right.

Reading Comprehension Questions

Reading comprehensions turn up in many standardized tests. That means there are standardized techniques that you can use to ace them.

First, read the questions.

You wouldn't start reading a book without looking at the cover or the blurb on the back page. You wouldn't read a newspaper article without glancing at the headline.

Before you start reading anything, you've always got some idea about the subject of the text.

Except on a reading comprehension.

When you dive into a reading comprehension question, you've got no idea what it's going to be about. You could be looking at a piece on the role of hemoglobin in blood or an article on Kiri Te Kanawa's influence on Maori society.

Dive in cold and you'll be in for a shock.

Read the questions first and you'll know what the piece is going to be about. You'll be going in mentally prepared—and you'll also know which areas are going to be the most important. That will save you tons of time and lots of re-reads.

Finally, as you read the text, pay particular attention to the first and last paragraphs and the beginnings and ends of each paragraph. That's where you'll find the summaries of ideas.

Essay Questions

In some ways, essay questions are amongst the hardest types of exam. You can't try a lucky guess and the answer isn't going to be staring you in the face.

If you don't know what to write, you're going to be in trouble.

On the other hand, examiners aren't just looking for a list of facts. In a survey, 114 college teachers were asked what they look for most when grading answers to essay questions. This is what they said in order of importance:

1. Reasoning ability
2. Factual accuracy
3. Relevance to question
4. Good organization
5. Complete answers
6. Clarity

What does that mean?

Well, you've got to have the facts. But most important is that you use the facts you possess to build a good argument.

As soon as you've decided on a question, start planning. You should be looking to spend at least 20 percent of your time just *planning* the answer. If you know what you're going to say, you'll be able to say it so much faster!

Remember, in the first paragraph, you say what you're going to say—and in the last paragraph, you say you've said it.

And each of the paragraphs in between should contain just one idea.

If you're arguing a position, you'll need to have at least one paragraph that presents the opposing view. The following paragraph will knock those arguments down.

For example, let's say you were asked whether you thought space exploration should be publicly funded. Your essay plan could look something like this:

Glossary of Essay Question Terms

Comment	-	discuss briefly.
Compare	-	emphasize similarities, but also present differences.
Contrast	-	give differences only
Criticize	-	give your judgment of benefits and limitations, with evidence.
Define	-	give meaning; no details.
Discuss	-	give reasons for and against, with details.
Enumerate	-	list the main points.
Explain	-	give the reasons.
Identify	-	list and describe.
Justify	-	prove or offer reasons.
Trace	-	give the main points from beginning to end.
Solve	-	provide a solution based on given facts or your knowledge.

1. Introduction

"Space is an important topic, and I will argue that the state should continue to fund exploration beyond Earth."

2. Argument for

"Space exploration addresses the essence of humanity: curiosity and the desire to constantly learn."

3. Argument against

"It cost a lot money which would be better spent on Earth."

4. Killer Argument For

"There's no reason we can't do both."

5. Conclusion

"The state should continue to fund exploration beyond Earth."

When you come to actually do the writing, make sure you use language that's natural and sincere. Forget about words like "thus" and "for" instead of "because." The examiners want to read an argument, not a piece of Romantic poetry.

And if you're not sure of your facts, be vague. It's better to say "at the end of the decade" if you're not sure whether the Apollo 11 landed in 1968 or 1969, than to guess and get it wrong.

Finally, and most importantly, back up your arguments.

This is why you need the facts. There is nothing guaranteed to alienate examiners faster than laying bare your personal opinions—unless that's what they've asked for (and they rarely do.)

More on Writing a Winning Essay

Introduction to the Reading Comprehension and Essay Writing Portion of the Test

Reading and writing are very different from most skills learned in school in that there is a level of art to it that does not exist in the exact sciences and mathematics. Still, while there are many ways to approach reading and writing, there is some consistency to how your skills can be tested.

We will spend a considerable amount of time discussing how to prepare for the reading comprehension section of the test. This part of the test will be multiple choices and each question will have only one correct response. One of the tricks is that several of the responses may be close to the right answer, but only one will completely respond to the question. To prepare you need to read both the questions and responses very carefully. Do not assume that because answer B contains correct information that it is the correct response. Keep reading. Answer E may respond to the question in a more complete and accurate way.

The essay section of the test will stretch your mind in a different direction but use more of the same skills. Instead of reading the passage carefully, you will need to carefully read your own writing and then make sure it is on target with the question. Many essay questions will have multiple parts. Make sure that every question in the question is addressed in your essay.

Preparing For the Essay Writing Section

When you sit down to take the exam you will be provided with two topics to write on. The purpose of the essays is to determine your ability to create text that is well thought out and organized and that follows standard rules of grammar and spelling. First, you will be asked to write an analytical essay about a concept or historical event. Next, you will be asked to write about an experience from your own personal perspective. You must use your own words. You will not need to have done any research before the exam. All of the information you will need to respond to the essay question will be contained in the question. They are not testing how much trivia you know. They are trying to see how you express yourself with words.

All statements made in your essays must be properly supported and you must respond to all of the issues raised by the questions. You are encouraged to create a pre-write and a rough draft before you write your final copy. Make sure your final draft is well organized. We will discuss how to create a great pre-write and final draft later in this section of the guide.

Good writing generally involves three milestones: the pre-write, the rough draft and the organization of the final copy. Do not try to skip any of these steps. They are all important in the creation of a great final essay. One mistake many test takers make is only writing one draft and submitting that as their final copy. Other test takers skip the pre-write and end up with a disorganized essay.

After you have read the question you should begin the prewriting process and determine what information you will include in each paragraph. This will help organize your thoughts and should lead to a better-constructed essay. This method of brainstorming can actually save you time and energy when writing the final copy. The testing center should provide you with enough paper to allow for space for a proper pre-write.

There is no set standard on how to create your pre-write. You need to find a system that works best for you. Some people are visual thinkers and need to have their information arranged on paper in a way that lets them see how to organize themselves. Some people are lateral thinkers and need to write their main points down to make sure all of them make sense and that nothing is lost in the final draft copy.

When you write your rough draft, you need to make sure that you have incorporated all of the key points from your pre-write. At this point, you do not need to be too concerned with everything being perfect. The rough draft is your chance to get your organized ideas, put them on paper and find a great way expresses them in your own words.

You can save the fine-tuning for the final copy. Once you get to final copy everything should be well organized, expressed in a unique way by you and presented in a persuasive well-structured style.

In the next portion of this guide we will go into more detail on how to create your pre-write, rough draft and final copy.

Three steps to a great essay

The Pre-write

The first basic step to good writing is to decide what you are going to write about and which part of the question your essay will focus on. Think about your audience and the impression you want to make on them. Write notes about what you want included in each and every paragraph. The first stage of the writing process: Organize the evidence you will use to support your thesis.

The Rough Draft

The next step towards effective writing: Formulate your ideas and start organizing sentences to make up your paragraph structure. Turn your key points into good sentences and include details. Formulate your ideas.

This is your chance to experiment with language and sentence structure. Do not worry if not all of your sentences are perfect. You will have a chance to refine them during the next step. Whenever you are writing a rough draft let your ideas flow freely out of you. You may make some mistakes, but you may find a great way to express yourself that you may have never thought of before!

Editing To Final Copy

The most important and final step: Proofread your drafts and make sure you have not made any spelling or grammatical errors.

Read all of your sentences very carefully. Do some of them shine? Keep them. Did a clunker sneak in? Get rid of it!

Does your sentence structure vary? It is not good to only have short sentences. It is equally bad to have nothing but long complex sentences. You need to make sure that your sentences are mixed up so that your text becomes more interesting and natural to read.

Make sure all of your points are clear and supported by facts.

Make sure your language is suitably complex and that the writing mechanics

work. Grammar is not the most important part of a good essay, but very poor grammar can make it difficult for people to understand the points you are trying to make! If people cannot understand you, then you are losing the battle before you have begun!

Good Writing

In this section we are going to discuss some of the elements that make good writing. You want to create writing that works and helps people understand your position. This is not only a skill that will help you now. Good writing follows you and makes any job easier. It also gives people a strong impression of who you are.

We will start off with some basic writing tips and then go into more detail later.

Basic Essay Writing Tips

- ☞ Make sure you understand the question
- ☞ Provide a complete response to the question
- ☞ Provide a solid essay structure,
- ☞ Provide evidence and support your thesis
- ☞ Use appropriate terms and ideas
- ☞ Proofread

How to Organize Your Essay

Don't be intimidated. You need to put a lot of thought into your writing. This can be difficult. There is always the temptation to simply get your words and ideas on paper as quickly as possible. Do not fall into this trap!

There are tremendous rewards if you make a compelling argument. Your argument can only be compelling if it is well written. This means you have to make sure it is very well organized. You can have the best argument in the world, but if it is poorly written or disorganized, you will not convince anyone you know what you are talking about!

Make sure you are familiar with the topic. Use whatever knowledge you may have at your disposal to strut your stuff! Remember, however, that you do not need to be the biggest expert in the world to write a good essay. Stick to what you know and avoid making up points that could be challenged later.

Method

Now we will provide you with a solid, time-tested method to good essay writing. You do not have to use this method to write a good essay, but this has been used by many people who have needed a strong way to express themselves on paper.

A well-structured essay has a beginning, middle, and an end.

Always keep this in mind. Many novice writers try to jump right into their main point, but then fail to find a proper way to support it. Or else they start with their argument and push immediately to their conclusion. This is a fatal flaw in good writing. You need to always move in a rational and logical order. Your essay needs to

start, support itself and then conclude. Each part is just as important as the other.

Beginning

Create a topic sentence to let the reader know what your argument is. Clearly state your point. A simple method is to simply restate the question with your response. Use this statement to draft your first paragraph.

Middle

Use the second paragraph to support your argument. You have already told people what you think. This is your chance to tell them why! Provide details and examples. Start to seriously address the question. This portion often takes more than one paragraph. Keep writing until you have made a persuasive argument.

Ending

Once you have made your point it is time to draft a conclusion. This final paragraph will in general restate your position and summarize the evidence you have used to support your position. It can be crafted as a stronger version of your first paragraph.

Practice Makes Perfect!

The most effective way to create a stunning essay is not to read about stunning essays. The best thing you can do is practice, practice, practice. Think of it as you would any sport or skill. The first time you swing at a fastball you may get a strike. But if you keep trying, eventually hitting home runs and line drives will become second nature to you.

It is no different with writing. The only way to become a good writer is to write often. A good tip is to write an essay from start to finish – including pre-write, rough draft and conclusion. Then, put the essay away and do not look at it for a week. When you do read it again you will be fresh. Ask yourself what you could have done better. What parts of your essay were strong? Which parts are weak and could have been written better?

Don't fret if your first attempts are not as strong as you would have liked them to be. This is a learning process. As you learn your own strengths and weaknesses, you will slowly become a more natural writer. Over time you will stop making the mistakes you made when you first started out.

Here is a practice essay to get you started!

- A. Slowly read the question and figure out exactly what it is asking from you. Sit back for a bit and mull it over in your brain. Do you have to argue a point or is it a simple test of your knowledge. Until you know what you are being asked, you cannot start the writing process.

Question:

Climbers recently celebrated the 50th anniversary of the first hike to the top of Mt. Everest. What is the fascination that many people have with climbing this tall and difficult mountain? It is not the highest peak in the world, yet it has somehow

continued to capture the world's imagination. What would lead someone to take on the difficult and dangerous task of climbing this peak?

- B. Stake out your argument. Figure out what your topic sentence will be and put it on paper. Perhaps, you need to restate the question as a declarative sentence. Use the rest of the paragraph to fully explain your position.
- C. Relax and consider how you will support your argument. Figure out what details you will need to convince the average reader. What are the strongest details in support of your position? Put them on paper as the basis for your next paragraphs. Make sure you are only using the strongest evidence at your disposal. Nobody likes to waste time reading about trivial details. Make sure your best arguments come first.
- D. Read what you have written down. Make sure it is in direct response to the question. Ask yourself if you would be swayed by your argument. If not, add some more convincing details. Worry more about content than grammar or spelling. The graders understand that you do not have access to a dictionary and are mostly looking for the strength of your arguments. Write legibly.
- E. Get ready to write your final paragraph. If you have followed directions, this should be fairly easy. You simply need to restate your topic sentence and summarize the convincing details you have already put on paper. Once it is there sit back and relax – your essay is complete!

Review your work

Let some time go by and then reread what you have written. A week is usually a good amount of time to wait. You will see your information and the essay question in a fresh light.

Try to determine if you have properly responded to the question and if you have created a well-structured essay that has a beginning, middle and conclusion. You might want to ask a friend to revise your work from an objective basis.

Take notes on what your strong points were and where you came up short. We all make mistakes when we are starting out. The important thing is to learn from them. Ask yourself these key questions:

- ☞ How well did you respond to the question?
- ☞ Did you use proper essay structure?
- ☞ Should you have added more details?
- ☞ Is your conclusion backed up by your earlier paragraphs?

Keep your notes around. A day or two later set yourself up with a new essay question. Before you start writing your new essay, read your notes. Store in the back of your mind where you tripped up on your previous essay. Also remember what was strong.

Now write your new essay with your strengths and weaknesses in the back of your mind. Remember to not skip any steps. Start with a pre-write, then a rough draft and then create your final copy. Make sure when you are writing that your essay has a beginning, middle and an end.

Good Advice

While all writers use somewhat different techniques, there are some common denominators to what practices good writers employ when crafting persuasive text. Some of these tips may be surprising and some of them may seem obvious. The point here is that these tips have been collected over the years by experts – both test takers and test graders. Think about them and figure out which points are apt to help you with your writing.

A good idea is to consult this list when you are looking at your essay a week after you wrote it. Which points – if you had followed them – would have helped you avoid the weak portions of your essay? How can you incorporate them into your writing the second, third or 90th time out?

- ☞ Focus. Read the question several times before you start to write.
- ☞ Highlight key words or phrases in the question to remind yourself what is important.
- ☞ Pre-write
- ☞ Organize your thoughts before you write. If your thoughts are not organized your essay won't be either.
- ☞ Worry more about ideas than spelling.
- ☞ Make sure your ideas flow.
- ☞ Try not to change too much between rough and final draft or else you may be back where you started.
- ☞ Don't write too large or leave enormous margins on the sides. The test grader can count the number of words you have written. You are not fooling anybody!
- ☞ Keep close tabs on how much time you have left to write.

Keep in Mind

In this section we will begin to discuss some writing and grammatical strategies that you should have been exposed to in your English classes. Do not worry if some of these concepts seem new or if you do not remember all of the rules. You can always come back and consult this list at a later time.

While good essays can vary a great deal in style, structure and technique, bad essays always have many elements in common.

These points include many elements to good writing that are often missed – sometimes even by experienced writers! Going over this list does not mean you are a bad writer. It simply means that everyone can use help in avoiding practices that lead to bad or less persuasive writing.

Over time, if you write frequently, avoiding many of these points will become second nature. For now, try and review each point carefully. Ask yourself if you have fallen into the habit of avoiding any of these rules.

Avoid Redundancy

You don't want to waste time repeating yourself. "Once he reached the peak he was at the top of the mountain" for example. The peak is the top of the mountain. Sometimes we become so enamored with the details that will support our argument that we become guilty of repeating ourselves in an attempt to hammer the points home.

This is a bad way to craft your essay. A supporting detail, a fact or a strong argument is just as strong the first time you say it as the second time. In fact, it may lose weight by boring the reader if it is repeated too many times in an unimaginative way.

When it comes to redundancy in sentences, you not only waste the space given to you in your workspace, but you also waste time that could be devoted to writing new sentences with stronger supporting information.

Always remember – repeating arguments does not make your case stronger. It makes your argument carry less weight.

Revise! Revise! Revise!

Don't stop once you have finished your rough draft. There is always room for improvement. Go back to the beginning and read over what you have written. Good writing can always be made better! Do not simply proofread for spelling errors. Look closer and try to find where your arguments need to be strengthened. Examine your transitional phrases. Do they properly link one idea to the next? If not, figure out how they could be made better.

This may seem like a lot of work, but don't consider it a waste of time. Even published authors go through two or more drafts of their work! As a beginning writer you may need to create several drafts before you have crafted the perfect essay.

Remember, your first draft will not be perfect – so why not use all the time at your disposal to create the best essay possible?

If you have time, you might want to wait a few minutes before you start to revise your rough draft. Often, clearing out your head a bit frees your mind to notice problems you might have missed if you went straight from writing your final paragraph to revising your introduction.

After a few minutes, you may have a new perspective on your writing and better ideas on how to improve it. This is why it is crucial to be constantly aware of your deadline – so you know how much time to wait before creating your next draft.

Do not use this as an excuse to procrastinate.

Brainstorming

In this section we will talk a bit about the brainstorming process. Up until now we have been giving you information about how to structure your essay as a whole once you have put your ideas and details together.

There is nothing wrong with this and obviously you will eventually need to get your ideas down on paper. But, first you need to have the ideas in the first place! Great essay responses do not come out of nowhere. While you will not need specific knowledge before you come into the exam, you will need to keep a clear head and use

as much of your general knowledge as possible. We all tend to know more about most subjects than we think. In addition, most essay questions on the test are written in an open ended way so that once you have an argument you want to make, you should be able to provide details and supporting facts.

Remember as well that there is not right or wrong response to any essay question. There are simply responses that are supported by information in the essay and responses that are not properly documented and supported.

This is why brainstorming is the most important part of writing and responding to any essay question. Before pen hits paper and you begin your prewriting, you need to craft your argument and piece together the supporting information in a logical, structured way.

There is no right or wrong technique to your brainstorming session.

The only wrong thing you can do is to not brainstorm at all.

Clustering

This is a simple, yet highly effective technique to help you organize your essay during your prewriting time. While this method is not for everyone, it has shown to work very well for people who are not accustomed to writing essays.

The simple truth is that some people are natural writers and can easily see how words should be arranged on the page. Other people, however, particularly those who excel at math and science need to organize themselves differently. The essay writing process can easily intimidate these types of people.

This is a brainstorming technique that has been shown to be highly effective for these types of students when they are put into a position where they need to write a convincing essay.

First, you need to select a topic or point of view for your essay. Write it down on a piece of paper and circle it. Outside the circle start writing down ideas that can support your point of view. Draw lines from these arguments back to the circle. Number the arguments in order of importance and use them for the central section of your essay. This method can make you realize how you need to structure your essay

There are several reasons why this method works for the types of highly organized individuals that find math and science easy, but get put off when they have to put their ideas on paper in essay format. They are:

- ☞ The student gets a holistic sense of the potential of the question by seeing points to be developed with an initial hierarchy.
- ☞ Brainstorming works better for some people in a non-linear environment.
- ☞ It takes a basic classroom technique for brainstorming and makes it part of a student's strategy for test taking.
- ☞ It allows the student to see the points he or she wants to make in a total picture. This is a repeat of the holistic virtue).
- ☞ It allows the student to see relationships of all the points to one another.
- ☞ It helps students who don't learn in a linear manner to view the question in a circular format.

No matter how strong a writer you think you are, it is probably worth your while to try this method at least once to see what effect it has on your writing. If it works – great! Keep doing it whenever you need to respond to an essay question. If it does not seem to help, you do not need to do it again.

Whatever you decide, it will not have been a waste of time. It is always a positive learning experience to attempt new ways to think about how you can start the brainstorming process and create the strongest essay possible!

Compare And Contrast

If you are asked to compare and contrast opposing points of view, you must remember to not only write about the differences, but also what makes most sides similar. A very common mistake when writing compare and contrast essays is to only write about what makes both subjects and arguments different. This is an easy way out, because the human mind instinctively latches onto the differences between objects. Otherwise we would have a hard time choosing the right type of milk in the grocery store.

What is harder, but equally important is mapping out what the objects or ideas have in common. A compare and contrast essay should have an equal amount of similarities and differences. A good technique is to make a list of all the things that makes the subjects different. Then count the number of items that you have come up with. Force yourself to come up with an equal number of items that the subjects have in common. Do not start writing until your list is equal on both sides.

Descriptive

A descriptive essay will require you to use lots of adjectives and adverbs. The goal here is to make the essay come to life in the readers mind. A common exercise in college writing courses is to ask students to write 1,000 words about their left hand. At first, students often find the task impossible. What, after all, can you say about your hand? But upon closer inspection, students will often start to notice details of their hand that are unique and interesting. Some, eventually, have trouble keeping the essay to 1,000 words.

Explanatory

An explanatory essay will require you to have an opinion and then explain why you hold that opinion. The good news is that you are free from having to come up with equal sides as you would in a compare and contrast essay. You may want to for fairness sake come up with one or two concessions to the opposing point of view – but this is not necessary. The important thing is to stake out an opinion and then hold your ground. Once you have settled on the argument you are going to make, you need to brainstorm the details that will best explain your argument.

Write these details down. Ask yourself if they would be enough to explain the subject to you. If not, come up with more details. These details will become the basis of your pre-write.

Discussion

If the essay is asking for a discussion, you will be expected to provide multiple points of view. This is very similar to a compare and contrast essay. The difference is that by the end of the text, you will be forced to come to a conclusion about what you

have written. You will have brought out different, sometimes opposing opinions. Now, at the end you will be required to take them as a whole and come to a conclusion.

Brainstorming these types of essays should come in two parts. Write down the different points of view along with details that explain each point of view. Then reread all of the different points of view and ask yourself what they have in common. What makes them different? Circle the common elements. Ask yourself what that tells you about the subject matter. Write down in one sentence what brings these arguments together. Then, do the same thing again, but this time write circle and write a sentence about what sets them apart. These two sentences will form the basis of your conclusion.

Argument

If you are asked for an argument, you must take on single point of view and defend it to the detriment of all other arguments. This is when you get to have a bit of fun. You are essentially the prosecutor or advocate of this point of view. Your goal is to destroy any arguments anyone with an opposing point of view may have. That is where you have to spend most of your time – slaughtering the opposition.

The easiest part of this type of essay will be staking out your point. Your theme should be strong enough that you do not need that much help defending it. Now, you need to concentrate on people who will attack your argument. Think about your position. Write down any and all arguments you can think of that would poke holes in your argument. Beside each argument, write down one response that would devastate it. Use this as the basis of your pre-write and rough draft.

Just the facts: Back up your opinions!

Something many people forget when writing essays is that it is not enough to have the right answer or to have the response that you think your grader will expect you to have. You have to be able to back up you opinion with facts and explanatory statements. Details can make your work much stronger.

When writing your essay, try to imagine arguments people might want to make against your opinions. Figure out what your defense would be to those arguments and make sure you include them in your writing. For every argument you must have at least one fact or detail to defend yourself.

If you do not have enough information to back up your argument, you need to brainstorm further or else pick a different argument to make.

Conclusion

Exams aren't meant to be fun. But they're not meant to be torture either. They're simply meant to test your knowledge and ability. Although few people will admit it, when you're properly prepared, and you know the answers, doing a good test can actually be an enjoyable experience.

In this guide, we've tried to give you a quick overview of what you'll need to get through exam time.

You'll need to prepare yourself physically and mentally. Don't let panic destroy your revisions or your practice tests. If you start early and plan well, you can use stress to motivate you instead of letting it massacre your chances.

You'll need to organize your material. Make sure you know exactly what you'll need to study and when you're going to study it. Leave plenty of time for practice tests—and for breaks.

Finally, when you're in the exam, use exam techniques to speed through the questions, narrow down your choices and guess the questions you don't know.

Get all these stages right, and you'll get a great grade.

Good luck!