

# How to Write an Essay under Exam Conditions

**5-10 minutes** - You will have a specified time to write each essay. Aim to spend roughly 5 minutes (or more) planning and thinking. You may think that this is a huge chunk out of the time available but it is time well spent. It will save you time overall and will mean you do most of the thinking at the start, allowing you to spend the rest of the time writing.

**Study the question** - The first thing is to study the question. You are not being asked to 'write everything you know about ...'. You are being asked a specific question that needs an answer that is directly related to it.

**Brainstorm** - Once you are sure what the question is asking of you, the next thing you should do is brainstorm. Simply write down everything you can think of in brief notes and in no particular order just to get it out of your mind and on to paper. You can organize it later but initially you will have a record of relevant points and information to include. They might remind you of other things too.

**Answer the question** - Now that you are aware of the demands of the question and have some ideas, you have to think about your answer. You need a main line of argument that will form the backbone of your essay. Once you have this, jot it down as it will form part of your introduction.

**Plan** - Now you have to organize the 'mess' that was your brainstorm into a well-structured essay. Decide whether the question is asking for a thematic approach, or chronological. Is it asking for causes to be evaluated or for a discussion of two sides of an argument? Once you have a general approach, you need to decide what each paragraph is going to include. Look at your brainstorm and begin to group ideas, include any more relevant factors or points that may come to you as you are planning. Start to order the paragraphs and try to see natural links between points or paragraphs to help the flow of the essay.

## **A rough guide to your plan should be:**

Introduction - Introducing your understanding of the question, how you plan to tackle it, what you are going to include and what your main line of argument is

(optional) 1 paragraph - Providing context (linking intro to rest of essay)

4 paragraphs - Each of a reasonable length discussing a single issue/factor (or combination of)

Conclusion - Summarizing the main arguments made in your essay and ending with your main argument.

**Catch the examiner's eye** - Your essay will be one of possibly hundreds that an examiner has to read and mark. No doubt examiners are all very professional and read each one thoroughly, but it doesn't hurt to give them a hand by making it easier for them to mark (and easier for them to give you more marks). So here are some ways to do this:

- Have a really good introduction. Have a snappy first sentence, show you have a firm grasp of the question and that you have a main line of argument. This tells the examiner where you are headed and also what to look out for.
- Have a good plan. If each paragraph deals with the factors, points or issues raised in your introduction, the examiner sees that you are fully in control.

- 'Sign-posting' - Make every paragraph catch the eye by beginning with a strong argumentative point that is linked to the main argument (backbone) of your essay. Then you can go on to explain and prove it.
- Try to make your essay fluid and easy to read. Ideally the points you make within a paragraph should flow from one to the other and each paragraph should link well with the next.
- Have a snappy ending. Summarise your main points and end with a clear and well thought out main argument. A strong ending will remind the examiner of what you have proven and show that you have been in control of the essay all the way through.

**Know your stuff!** - Writing a good essay requires the writer to know what to write. When you brainstorm there should be lots of things jotted on the page. When you write the essay itself, you need to have clear arguments, to be aware of the issues and be able to back up analytical points with appropriately selected information and evidence and some historians' views. So you will need to have worked hard in your studies, and done some effective revision.

**But** - A good essay style will help you make the most of what you know. If you know a bit about the essay topic, a good essay style can hide some of your inadequacies. If you really know your stuff, you should end up writing an excellent essay rather than just a good essay.

In summary:

- 5-10 minutes - is time well spent on planning
- Study the question
- Brainstorm
- Answer the question
- Structure the main parts of the essay
- Catch the examiner's eye
- Know your stuff!