

Timed Writing (Plans & Problems)

You should always start your writing with a plan. Having an outline will help you to stay focused and use your time well. However, things do not always go as planned. In this section, you will learn some strategies for how to be flexible when the unexpected happens.

Problems with Following an Outline

First, let's think about some of the reasons you might need to change your outline. These problems might also happen in your drafted writing, but timed writing does not give you much time to adjust.

1. A topic sentence is harder to support than you thought it would be.
2. You realize you aren't happy with the position you decided on.
3. The place you are taking the test is distracting you.
4. Your typing skills with an American English keyboard (QWERTY) are not strong.
5. You took longer than planned to write the outline.
6. The test is long and you are starting to feel tired and lose focus.
7. The test is important and your stress is making it hard to do your best.
8. You have taken the test before and didn't get the writing score you wanted and you are worrying that will happen again.

Problems 1-5 are all writing-based concerns and can be solved with a few simple strategies.

1. If a point is too hard to develop, you can start writing about your next point. Leave the difficult one to work on later. If you can't think of how to continue writing that paragraph, you can choose to leave it incomplete to show that you did start a new idea, or you can delete it. Sometimes it is better to show that you tried to write more and ran out of time. Sometimes it would be inappropriate to have an incomplete idea. Think about what is best for that assignment.
2. Your position usually does not matter in timed writing. The teacher wants to see your ability to explain and defend using clear reasons and support. The teacher wants to know what you learned from class and how you connect that to your other knowledge. This means it is rare that you would lose points for choosing "the wrong side." If you decide you don't like the position, it doesn't really matter. What matters is writing a well-organized response. Don't start over!
3. There is very little you can do to change the test environment. Some testing centers (like the ELC during end of semester testing) are filled with many people taking the test. Taking a test at home can provide different distractions. The best thing you can do is practice in similar environments as much as you can before the actual test. If you experience test anxiety, you can ask for accommodations. The professor may be able to give you more time or let you take the test in a quiet place. Some accommodations might require a doctor's note.
4. There is not a true shortcut for typing. While there may be times that you will have timed writing questions on a paper test, it is becoming less and less common in university settings. Practice with typing instruction websites and practice with the keyboard as much as you can.
5. One thing that will help you to adjust to this problem is to organize your outline with your strongest and easiest points at the beginning. By organizing it this way, you know that you have the thesis and restatement as a minimum introduction and conclusion, and you will begin the most important supporting idea first. That way, if you run out of time, you can delete what you didn't get to.

As you can see from examples 6-8, not all of the problems you might have are just about organization or time. Anxiety and stress about a test or the environment of the testing room can impact your ability to do your best. Instead of making those problems worse by panicking, acknowledge the feelings and make a new plan. Take another look at your outline and see what you can delete. What is still necessary to explain? What points would just be an extra to include if you have time? Let yourself put your focus on the essentials and minimum expectations. You should have time to write those parts. Anything more you have time to do just improves your writing, but you will know that you accomplished the most important parts of the tasks.

Exercises

Exercise 1: Reflection

Write a short reflection (1 paragraph) to answer the question below.

What problems do you face when you are asked to do timed writing? How do you overcome those problems?
What strategy would you like to try?

Exercise 2: Timed Writing Practice

You have 30 minutes to respond to this prompt. Your answer should be around 300 words long. Before you begin, think about how you will use your strategies if you have an obstacle with following your plan.

What makes someone a good friend? Explain why the characteristic(s) you chose are important.



This content is provided to you freely by BYU Open Learning Network.

Access it online or download it at https://open.byu.edu/academic_a_writing/timed_writing_4.

