

Exam Writing

April 4, 2022

Ross Sundberg

McGill Writing Centre

Slides by Sarah Leu, PhD

Today's Agenda

Focus of the Workshop:

- Writing under time pressure
- Organizing ideas

- Part 1: “The Quick Writing Process” (by Sanford Kaye)
- Part 2: Analysis and Practice
 - Sample exam question
 - Sample strong response
- Q/A
- Resources at the McGill Writing Centre

The “Quick Writing Process”

- Read
- Plan
- Generate
- Draft
- Review

Reading the Exam Question(s)

- What is it asking you to *do*?
- What does your reader want to see?
- What do you need to know or consider?
- What are some different perspectives you should consider?
- How might you organize a response to this question?
 - The nature of the question might suggest an organizational strategy

Planning Your Response(s)

- Read the whole exam
- Plan your use of time for the whole exam
 - ALWAYS allot time for planning/pre-writing and reviewing
 - Weight of the questions?
- Choose your strategy
 - Easiest questions first?

For more, read: <https://qz.com/978273/a-stanford-professors-15-minute-study-hack-improves-test-grades-by-a-third-of-a-grade/>

Planning Your Response(s)

E.g.:

- 1:00-1:40—Planning questions 1-4
- 1:40-2:00—Writing question 1
- 2:00-2:20—Writing question 2
- 2:20-2:40—Writing question 3
- 2:40-3:30—Writing question 4
- 3:30-4:00—Review/Proofread

Generating Ideas (Pre-writing)

- Note down examples, cases, principles, information, etc. relevant to each part of the question
 - **Why** is it relevant?
- Write your *provisional thesis* (i.e., the short answer to the Q)
- Generate as many “*because*” clauses as you can
 - X is better than Y *because*...
 - A is not liable for B *because*...
- Complicate it
 - Qualify your position
 - Consider other angles/perspectives

Generating, cont.

- Outline your response
 - Beginning-middle-end
 - Sub-sections in the middle?
 - Look back at the question and your tentative structure
- Revise your provisional thesis
 - Consider: Add an “*although*” clause to your provisional thesis?

Drafting (the “roughly final” draft)

- Use text from the generating stage if you can
- Add examples, citations to literature, etc.
- Answer your reader’s questions
 - Especially: “Why?” and “So what?”
- Make connections between ideas explicit
- Suggestion: Write your introduction last

Reviewing

- Is your organizational strategy clear?
 - Each section or paragraph is *about* something
 - Each section or paragraph is *doing* something
 - Would subheadings help?
- Does information flow from known to new?
- Topic sentences connect ideas between paragraphs?

Topic Sentences

- As you write, topic sentences help you think through what your paragraph will accomplish
- As you read, topic sentences guide you along and create expectations for what you will be reading and thinking about

Add a topic sentence 1

The summer had been extremely hot and dry. Many brushfires had broken out. People were told not to water their lawns or wash their cars. People responded by using less water and being careful about how they used water. Everyone realized the new rules were in their best interest.

Add a topic sentence 2

There are many parks to enjoy. Museums and aquariums have interesting exhibits. Large stores and malls have a great selection of things to buy. Many large cities also have major sports teams to watch.

Analysis and Practice: Question #1

1. What is it asking you to *do*?
2. What does your reader want to see?
3. What do you need to know or consider?
4. What are some different perspectives you should consider?
5. How might you organize a response to this question?
6. Generate some ideas and outline a response.

Analyze Question 1

Question 1: Imagine that you work for the Federal Minister of Justice. The Minister is contemplating introducing a ‘regulatory’ scheme for accidents caused by trains derailing or colliding. The scheme has three main elements. First, all railroad companies must contribute annually to an ‘accident insurance’ fund (according to the number of railcars the company has in usage). Second, anyone who is harmed by a train accident can obtain compensation from the fund in an amount determined by a schedule. Third, it is no longer possible to bring civil actions for injuries arising from train accidents; the only recourse is to apply to the fund. The Minister wants to know whether you think regulatory schemes of this kind are a good idea. The minister has specified that your memo should draw on your study of ECO and that it should focus on the general merits of replacing civil liability with regulatory schemes of this kind.

Analysis of Sample Response

- How is the response structured?
 - Outline the response and compare it to your own outline
- Is the structure of the response related to what was asked in the question? If so, how?
- How does the writer connect or transition between ideas?
- Can you think of ways to improve this response? Other ways to structure it?

Questions?

Resources at the McGill Writing Centre

- Tutorial Service
- Courses
 - Graduate—Graphos
 - Undergraduate
 - Academic writing
 - Academic writing for students who speak English as a 2nd language
 - Take a placement test to get a spot!

<https://www.mcgill.ca/mwc/>