

HOW TO APPROACH THE ESSAY WRITING TASK

The Strategies and How-To's

First, it is important to acknowledge that the ACT essay is a unique writing experience – essentially, a first draft that is to be graded. Your very well-meaning English teachers most likely taught you how to do “the writing process” where steps of brainstorming, outlining, drafting, revising, and final drafting take lots of time, and you often are evaluated on your process as well as your product (i.e. scores for brainstorming, more scores for outlining, extra points for receiving outside editing help, etc.). The ACT essay is going to be evaluated on PRODUCT alone. However, all of your process steps are still important. The process steps just really, really, really have to be sped up to meet the time requirement.

Here is the strategy:

Step 1: THINK: Read, decipher and think about the question posed (3 minutes)

- Underline as you read key words in the question posed.
- Pick a side. The assignment question that you are going to be given will be very broad. You need to quickly narrow it down and come up with an argument that specifically addresses the topic.
- Choose your examples. Think about 2-3 examples that you can write about intelligently, confidently and passionately.

Step 2: PLAN (no more than 5 minutes)

This is critical and the key to a successful essay. Spend time thinking, planning and outlining each paragraph before you write a single word. This is your roadmap for your entire essay; don't even think about beginning to write without one.

You will not be given additional scrap paper on the day of the test. So, your planning and outlining will have to happen on the blank pages in your test booklet. The outline is for your own organizational purposes and so that you will not forget any of your important points or examples once you start writing.

Step 3: WRITE (17-18 minutes)

Seventeen minutes is not a lot of time; however, it should be adequate time to write three to five solid paragraphs if you are working from a well-considered outline. Follow your outline. There are many, many important principles of good writing; keep in mind the main skills that the ACT evaluates: developing a point of view through reasoning and critical thinking, selecting appropriate examples and evidence, providing a clear organization, and using varied sentence structure, good vocabulary and the fundamentals of good grammar and mechanics.

In order to maintain the best “appearance” for your essay, practice writing quickly AND neatly. Also, provide clear paragraph breaks in your writing that are easy for the readers to notice.

Step 4: REVIEW (3 minutes)

You are writing under pressure, so take time to review your work. You definitely will not have time to revise substantially or proofread for every little error. Scores of “6” and “5” are rewarded for writing that is free or generally free of most errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics. An essay with more errors may be given a “4,” and writing that contains an accumulation of errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics may earn a “3.” Through practice, you will become familiar with the types of errors that you are most likely to make so that you can look for these.

Some common writing errors to look for in your review:

- Omitted words
- Sentence fragments
- Run-on sentences (remember your “FANBOYS”)
- Subject-verb agreement errors
- Misplaced modifiers
- Pronoun-antecedent agreement errors
- Misused words (“their” for “they’re and other homophones)
- Spelling errors

Do not hesitate to make any revisions or corrections on your essay. Keep in mind that these are timed first drafts. Make all revisions very clear by using a single line to cross out and asterisks to mark where text may be inserted.