

Elements of the Effective In-Class Essay

(or even the WPE)

A reader is looking at the following in your essay:

Thesis (the main point of the essay)

Because the reader probably has a large stack of papers to grade and may be in a hurry, you usually want to state your thesis early on. Your reader will know right away that you understand the question and know the answer. If you change your mind part way through the writing, go back and adjust the thesis statement as needed.

Complete answer (subpoints to prove the thesis)

Read the prompt carefully to make sure you have addressed all parts thoroughly. Reread the essay before you turn it in to make sure you didn't leave anything out.

A WPE essay that forgets to summarize the reading or only makes one or two main points almost certainly will not pass. Check that you aren't just repeating the same idea in different words. Also a WPE essay will pass only if it includes all of the required elements.

Concrete detail (discussion to illustrate/prove the subpoints)

An effective essay elaborates on its points. Don't just tell us, "That's a nice car." Provide details to show us. If you say it's fast, say how fast ("goes from 0 to 60 in 5 seconds"). And don't only tell us about its speed, give us other specific, concrete reasons why "it's a nice car" (leather interior, twelve cup-holders, and so on). You should be demonstrating your expertise and illustrating your points, not expecting the reader to fill in the blanks.

Effective, logical analysis

Make sure the logic works. Check to see that each sentence logically follows from the one before it and that you have used transitions to guide your reader. Don't leave out or add the word *not* by mistake. Avoid logical fallacies such as overgeneralization, false analogy, non sequiturs . . .

Organization

Some writers prefer to write from an outline so they can organize their ideas at the start. Other writers find outlines too limiting. Practice to see which you prefer: remember an outline can be as informal as a quick list of ideas. Either way, make sure to group like ideas, use a logical order, cross out off-topic statements and repeated ideas, and save your strongest points for last. Use transitions to guide your reader.

Mechanics

Take time to check spelling, grammar, and punctuation. A few mechanical errors will not cause you to fail the exam, but frequent and especially—confusing—mechanical errors will frustrate your reader. You want to show off your ideas to their best advantage, so clean up your wording as much as you can. (A quick editing trick: read the essay backwards sentence by sentence.)

Handwriting and printing

Make your handwriting or printing as legible as possible. You don't want to irritate your reader by forcing him or her to slow down to decipher scrawl. If you usually handwrite, consider printing (or vice versa). If you are in a hurry, write an outline in your usual quick scrawl, but do the essay itself in your slower, neater hand.

Time-savers

- ⇒ Use the back of the test, or tear out the center of the blue book for scratch paper
- ⇒ Organize an outline with numbers, letters before writing