

Guidelines for Writing Essays on Standardized Tests

- **Be sure to follow the instructions and write about the topic given.** If you get off topic, it's unlikely that you'll receive a good score, no matter how well you write.
- **Pace yourself, but be efficient.** Don't rush, but make sure that you get your thesis and your most important arguments and examples on the paper before time is up. Even an unfinished essay can receive a good score if the author has demonstrated an ability to make a convincing argument.
- **Think before you write.** If you start writing before you have a good idea about what you want to say, you'll end up writing a disorganized, unconvincing essay. Take a few minutes before you begin writing to organize your thoughts. Write a brief outline if that will help. In addition, as you write, think before you start each new sentence.
- **Quality is more important than quantity.** Although essays that receive high scores are usually not short, it's better to write a shorter but more effective and convincing essay than to write a 300-word essay without a clear point or sense of organization.
- **Make every word count.** Avoid repetition and unnecessarily long sentences and expressions. It's better to state things simply, but efficiently and clearly, than to spend time trying to sound impressive.
- **Remember that your goal is to make a persuasive argument.** Whether you're writing about why 16-year-olds should be allowed to drive or about the most memorable day of your life, writing is always persuasive. If you're writing about the former topic, you need to present facts and reasons that support your position; if you're writing about the latter topic, you need to present information that will convince the reader that that day was truly important in your life.
- **State your thesis clearly, and make sure that your argument supports it.** Your "thesis" is the main point that you want to make, the idea of which you want to convince the reader. If your essay doesn't contain a clear thesis statement (usually at the end of the introduction), your essay is likely to be confusing. And obviously, if your argument doesn't support your thesis, your essay will not be effective.
- **Base your essay on concrete evidence: specific reasons and examples that support your thesis.** Although you have to look at the big picture and be abstract at times, without concrete evidence your argument won't be effective.
- **Concentrate on the body of the essay; the introduction and conclusion are not as important.** Very basic and functional introductions and conclusions are sufficient for timed essays. Don't spend a lot of time writing a brilliant introduction and then fail to leave yourself time to support your thesis with evidence. (But if you do have time to write a more thoughtful and creative intro and conclusion, your essay will be even stronger.)
- **Let what you have to say dictate the structure of your essay, but try to keep it simple and clear.** The structure of your essay will vary depending on the topic. Organize your ideas into paragraphs in a way that's appropriate for your topic. Stick to a fairly basic structure, and include topic sentences in each paragraph.
- **Be specific and accurate in your presentation of facts.** Broad generalizations and inaccurate information make an essay weak, so don't use an example that you're not sure about or that you only have very general things to say about (e.g., don't talk about the

French Revolution if all you know is that there was a revolution and a bunch of people got killed).

- ***On most standardized tests, it's perfectly acceptable to write from the first person point of view.*** Although in writing some essays it's preferable to avoid "I" and "me" and write from a completely objective point of view, for these kinds of essays it is not only acceptable but sometimes even *required* by the topic. Even for an essay topic that's not specifically about something personal, using examples from your own experience can be very effective. You probably know yourself and your own life better than you know history or literature, and personal experiences are usually more emotionally resonant.
- ***Follow the rules of Standard English.*** Avoid ungrammatical expressions. Try to apply what you have learned from grammar exercises to your own writing.
- ***Avoid slang.*** Many young writers are so used to using slang expressions that they use them unconsciously and often, but slang is inappropriate for an essay.
- ***Don't write beyond your abilities; a conversational and natural tone is best.*** In an effort to sound intelligent and educated, some writers will try to use expressions they don't really understand and will try to write in a very formal style that they haven't really mastered. Write in a natural way, as if you're having an intelligent conversation.
- ***If at all possible, proofread your essay before you turn it in.*** It's almost inevitable that, in rushing to write an entire essay in a short period of time, you will make some stupid mistakes. It should be easy to spot most of these mistakes and correct them if you can read over your essay one time before you turn it in.
- ***Write legibly.*** Handwriting is not supposed to be a factor in your score, but an essay that is difficult to read can be frustrating, and a frustrated scorer isn't likely to be very forgiving. The scorers have hundreds of essays to score every day, so they're not going to be able to spend a lot of time deciphering your writing, and they might miss or misunderstand some of your important statements and ideas.