Practical Tips before Writing the Essay

1. **At home:** Anticipate the essay questions by making up your own essay questions that will probably appear on your test. You will be right most of the time. **Highly recommended:** Meet with a study group to both share these questions and discuss possible responses.

2. Immediately upon starting a test, read the whole test quickly and look for the essay questions, (if the whole test is NOT essay questions, almost always these are at the end of the test). Read the essay questions carefully. If you have a choice from many essays, start making your choices early and continue to do this while taking the rest of the test.

3. **Blank page technique:** Once you know the essay questions, get your teacher’s permission to use a blank sheet of paper to “uncram” your mind, (or take one page of a blue book to do this). Jot down any information about to fly out of your head. As you take the other parts of the test, keep adding notes to this blank page. This will serve as a map or outline while you are answering your essay questions.

Keys to Writing Successful In-class Essays

1. Focus on the **key word(s)** of the essay question. These will be verbs that will give you an indication of what you are actually being asked to do in the essay. Some common keys words include: **explain, define, analyze, critique, compare, enumerate, etc.** When you read the essay question, analyze it by circling the **key word** and making sure you understand the task at hand.

   Translate the question. Sometimes the essay doesn’t pose a question, but rather makes a statement and asks for a comment of some sort. For these, you will need to “translate” this statement into a question.

2. Use the first sentence of your response to both summarize the task of the essay question and create a topic sentence, (i.e. a thesis statement) that should shape and direct the rest of your question. You need NOT write an introduction. Don’t waste time in a test. Get immediately to the response.

3. Immediately after the topic sentence, start providing the factual information that will support your idea. Be as specific and precise as you can.

4. Use transitional words and expressions throughout your answer. These are guideposts to your teachers that you are controlling the flow and organization of your essay. Teachers LOVE these attempts to unify your essays.
**Bonus Techniques**

- Although these are essay questions, usually points are rewarded for the extent of your factual information and your interpretation of those facts, (if that is what is asked). Don’t ramble into unsolicited opinions, personal experiences, and irrelevant information. Tempt your teacher with your mastery of factual information.

- Acknowledge your teacher’s favorite ideas. The essay test is usually no place to quibble with your teacher’s favorite theories and explanations; class discussion was the place to do this. If you have paid attention in class (always a good idea), you will recognize opportunities to include these pet ideas in the essay portion of the test.

- Keep your eye on the time. Budget according to (a) how many questions you are required to answer, (b) the relative point value of each question.

- Remember the **partial credit imperative**. Generally, teachers will give you partial credit for a partial answer. Since essays are usually worth the most points in a given exam, an incomplete essay question, even one poorly done, is almost always worth more than individual true/false or multiple choice answers. **Result:** Always write something for every required essay.

- Leave a nice margin on both sides of your response as well as plenty of space between essay questions. It is likely that while you are checking your exam or writing the next essay question, something you forgot will occur to you. Space in the margins and at the end of the question will give you room to put these new ideas in.

- Mention something not precisely called for in the question but which amplifies your answer and impresses your teacher. What can you mention? A work of literature, a historical event, a contemporary news issue, a class discussion.

- **DO NOT** mention that you are not an “expert” or that you don’t know what you are talking about.

- Avoid obvious, mundane ideas like “Everyone is entitled to his or her own opinion” and avoid clichés like “In today’s world” or “I truly believe.” These drive teachers crazy.

- If time runs short, jot down notes, and maybe, a mini-outline—in short, anything that will show your teacher what you would have done with more time.

- Before the teacher returns the tests, ask if he or she will share with the class an “A” response. If your teacher does not do this, ask around and find an “A” response. Use this as a model for comparison and future study, (and to find out what your teacher will reward).

- Don’t write extra questions. Do what is asked, not more.

- Lots of paragraphing will help a teacher see that you are organizing your ideas.