

One Page Concept Review: Troubleshooting

Essay Problems

Problem: I take too long to write essays.

- Are you planning first? Things go much smoother if you know exactly where you're going with the essay.
- More to the point, are you using one of the four basic structures that I've suggested over the course of this class? The idea of these canned structures is not that they're the only way to organize essays, but that by deciding you're going to default to one of these structures beforehand, you save time in the planning process. If you're re-designing the wheel every time you start, of course planning is going to take longer (tempting you to skip planning altogether).
- Are you trying to do too much? If it's a Q1 or Q2 essay, write about one pattern in the text and connect to a bigger idea (a theme, a technique that the writer is using, characterization, conflict, mood, etc.). If it's a Q3 essay, write about one character or one conflict that connects to a larger theme in the book instead of trying to write about the entirety of the novel or play. If your first question in planning isn't, "How am I going to narrow this?" you risk biting off more than you can chew in 40 minutes.
- Are you leaving yourself enough time for the conclusion? This is where you tie it all together and suggest the importance to the big picture (whether you're focusing on theme, a technique that the writer is using, characterization, conflict, mood, etc.). While it is true that the body paragraphs are primarily going to determine where your score lies, a solid conclusion that does more than just sum up can and does raise your grade by a score point. Don't run out of time here.
- Of course this means you have to know in advance what you're leading up to before you start. This means going back to planning.
- Have you studied for the Q3 essay? This means knowing the primary internal and external conflict for the main characters and two big themes you're most comfortable writing about. If you know in advance the sort of essay you're looking to write for the books and novels you are prioritizing for the Q3 essay, you are doing most of your thinking before the test, and the thinking you're doing during the test is how to adapt the prompt to the essay you're already prepared to write. This saves a lot of planning time.
- Are you annotating too much? The most technical essay is usually the poem one, so a more thorough annotation may make sense here. However, even here I would suggest little more than a line marking the chunks in the poem (with a label affixed to what differentiates each chunk), underlined words and images you will be using in your body paragraphs, and maybe a metaphor/metonym triangle or two.
- If you're just slow and you know you're always going to be slow no matter how many shortcuts you take to save time, here's what you do. First, figure out which of the essays is going to be your weakest. Second, commit to writing it first. Third, do **not** use one of the four basic essay structures (which all divide the topic into two parts). Fourth, do **not** divide the topic, and instead write one long body paragraph about why your thesis is true (you still need an intro and concluding paragraph though). Fifth, make sure this is longer than a page and a half. Sixth, commit to writing this intentionally superficial, three paragraph essay in about twenty minutes (time yourself). That should steal you about fifteen to twenty minutes of time to work on the other two essays (make sure they're good).

Problem: I don't know how much to write.

- Let's assume for the sake of these guidelines that you have average size handwriting and that you utilize average margin sizes (neither writing all the way to the extreme edge of the paper or leaving two

to three inches of blank space at the right of the paper). If this is not true, adjust these guidelines accordingly.

- Also remember that the pages in the test booklet are smaller than notebook paper, so there's no need to panic about these guidelines.
- If you only fill up half a page, you are almost certainly scoring a one or two.
- If you only fill up one page (or just a little beyond), you are almost certainly scoring a three or four.
- Note that any of the above scores make it difficult for you to pass the test unless you have well above average multiple choice skills.
- If you pass the page and a half threshold, you are potentially scoring a five.
- If you pass the two page threshold, you are potentially scoring a six.
- Upper half essays are usually longer than two and a half pages.
- If your essay is longer than three and a half pages, you are probably doing too much and trading off with time needed to complete the other essays.
- These essay lengths are just guidelines, but I can tell you from personal experience of having scored these tests for College Board that these lengths correlate with these scores well over 90% of the time.

Problem: I don't know how to begin.

- The reason why I haven't emphasized introductions is that they don't generally do much for your overall score. It is essential you have a good thesis, but the stuff beforehand (introducing the characters, conflict you will be examining, and approach of the essay) can be quite functional and dull without lowering your grade.
- Q1 and Q2 intros may only be two to three sentences (including the thesis). That's okay.
- Q3 intros must establish the bare minimum of what the reader needs to know about the book in order to understand your essay. That means by their nature they will involve a bit of summary, which should be easy to generate.
- If you can think of a clever, engaging approach to the introduction, by all means do it. If it takes more than a minute and you still haven't come up with one, write the boring one and move on to the parts of the essay that will actually affect your score.

Problem: I write too much.

- You almost certainly have one of two issues. One, you didn't narrow the topic and so you commit to writing an essay that you realistically can't produce in about forty minutes. Two, you didn't plan, so you start rambling and summarizing. If it's the second of these, you probably also lack strong topic sentences that give direction to your body paragraphs.
- Smart planning solves both these issues.
- A third possibility (less common) is that your discussion of examples in body paragraphs is too developed. Here's the rule of thumb. If you're going to *fully* discuss one example in a body paragraph, that example should be your entire focus for the body paragraph. Other evidence should be in reference to that primary example. The alternative is to only discuss the *most relevant* aspects of two examples in a body paragraph. If you're doing this, make sure you don't try to do everything with these two examples (so that your body paragraph size gets out of control).
- If you can't cut down your analysis of the two examples, you've probably not narrowed enough, and the contrast between the two examples probably should have been the structure for the entire essay.