Writing the State Exit Essay

Since you’re reading this, it’s likely that you’re about to take the Florida State Exit Writing Exam or will do so sometime during the current semester.

Either that or you have entirely too much time to spare and should probably take up knitting.

This guide is intended to help you through the essay part of that adventure and is divided into simple steps to help you focus and prepare.

The first thing to consider is that writing isn’t as hard as you may think....

No, seriously, come back, sit down.

It’s true; in fact, the basics are quite formulaic, much like math. So, if you’ve “never liked writing” or “never been good at English” or even if you “hate essays,” don’t despair. You’ll find that the fundamental issues are very much within your realm of possibility.

As a matter of fact, they’re extremely doable, so...

1) Relax!

Don’t undermine your own efforts by creating a mental block.

You can be a good writer. In fact, you study or engage in the basic essay form most every day. Think about the various types of communication you participate in on a daily basis:

- talking on the phone,
- watching TV,
- reading (Well... a teacher can hope).

Each of these forms of communication has a similar structure: an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. In this way, they’re much like essays.

If you have any doubt about this, try calling a friend and starting your conversation in the middle:

“...AND THEN I WAS LIKE, GET REAL, SO SHE....”

It would be a bit confusing, right?
That’s why you start by saying, “Hi” or “Yo” or whatever greeting you use. Soon you get to the “meat” of your conversation, and then at the end, you conclude with “Goodbye” or “See ya.” You get the idea... there’s an introduction, a body, and a conclusion.

When you’re watching TV, it’s a similar situation. The program you’re enjoying also has an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. The introduction sets up the story, the body fleshes it out, and the conclusion brings it to a satisfying close. The divisions are nicely drawn by annoying commercials unless you’re watching HBO or some other blessedly commercial-free channel, and you can clearly see an introduction, a body, and a conclusion here as well. Again, you’ll find that the structure is just like that of an essay: each part has its own place and purpose.

You see? It’s not as hard as you thought, and the best way to begin is by...

2) Brainstorming

When you write any essay, you begin with a topic. Sitting down to take the State Exit essay, you’ll be given two topics to choose from, and you’ll need to write an essay about only one of them.

This is already to your advantage since if you get one topic that’s seen the business end of a skunk, you can choose the other one.

It would be unfortunate to get two topics you dislike, but keep in mind that you can write an essay about anything even if you’re creating fictional content: What you say on the test essay is not really important; you’re being tested for how you’re saying it.

So... if you accidentally assert that the Rocky Mountains are in Florida, don’t worry about it; you’re not being tested on your knowledge of geography, geology, or tourism.

On the State Exit essay, factual errors don’t count; grammatical and style errors do.

Once you decide on a topic, it’s time for brainstorming, which by the way, does not involve squishy gray matter raining down from the sky as the name suggests, but is a term to indicate a session of concentrated thought about a particular thing, in this case your topic. (You’ll find some handy methods detailed in your Fundamentals of Writing II text, College Writing Skills with Readings, on pages 22-31.)
The idea is to take all of your thoughts about the topic and move them from your head to the paper in front of you. Once you do this, your thoughts become easier to organize, and you will see possibilities start to emerge for a...

3) Thesis Statement

This baby is the guiding light of your paper. It’s the sentence that tells what the whole essay is about, the main idea... the central point... the purpose... the beacon in the darkness....

Your thesis statement lights the way, guiding your writing to safety.

Stop me before I get carried away!

You’re right; it’s too late, but it’s just that important. Without a thesis, there’s nothing binding your essay together, nothing to write about.

A thesis statement can be broken down into parts: a topic and a main idea. Your current text calls this the “main point,” and your Fundamentals of Writing I text calls it the “controlling idea,” but they both refer to the same thing. Here’s an example:

The food at Donovan’s Eats is far better than that at any other diner.

Topic: The food at Donovan’s Eats

Main idea: is far better than that at any other diner.

It should also be noted that the main idea should contain an attitude. Without one, there isn’t much to write about.

In the case of Donovan’s Eats, the attitude is the contention that the food is “far better.”

The next example further illustrates why an attitude is necessary:

The flamingo is pink. (There’s not much to write about because there is no attitude.)

The flamingo is beautiful. (This begs the question, “Why?” and in doing so gives the writer something to support.)

So, the thesis should always prompt a question.
In addition, your thesis should be neither too broad nor too narrow. (On pages, 50-60 in your text, you’ll find more information about the thesis.)

You will also likely want to include a development plan in your thesis. This will indicate how you intend to answer the question that the thesis raises. Look at the following example:

The food at Donovan’s Eats is far better than that at any other diner because Donovan uses only fresh ingredients, serves huge portions, and expertly seasons all meals.

At this point in the process, you’ll probably be feeling pretty good about your progress, and well you should. You’ve conquered the heart of the essay, the thesis.

Have some chocolate or a cookie, but not a beer....

“Miller time” comes later.

![Image]

When writing an essay, first think, then drink.

So what’s next? Pinch yourself. No, seriously. Come on, you can do better than that. Do you hear that sound you’re making?  
Ow!  Ow!  Well, you’re correct; how wise you are! The next step is, indeed, the...

4) Outline

The outline is the instruction sheet that tells exactly what to do and what the essay is going to look like.

“Who,” you may ask, “is the wonderful, considerate person responsible for providing these convenient and wisdom-infused instructions, and where may I find this amazing sage?”

Well, with gas prices climbing to entirely unreasonable levels, you’ll be pleased to know that it will take no driving to reach this person.

In fact, you are both in the same room... the same body no less. It’s you! You didn’t know you were so smart, did you? Listen to yourself, and let the outline be your guide.

When taking a test, outlining will mean devoting those first few minutes of the test time to this purpose, but it will pay off in the form of a better and faster-written essay.
Students often forego this important step of the essay process. These are the same people who put together a bicycle without looking at the instruction sheet and then wonder why they are left with extra parts and why the front wheel keeps dropping off just as they're crossing the train tracks.

You don’t want this to happen, especially when the Exit Exam train is coming.

You see, the graders of your essay start to frown when a tire is missing from your bicycle—uh, your essay that is—and we want to keep the brows of those graders calm and unfurrowed. That is to say, we want our essays to be organized well, and an outline is the solution.

For our purposes, we’ll discuss the outlining of only the body, the support of the essay. The major support points will be represented by Roman numerals and the sub-topics, the support for each major support point, will be represented by capital letters. You don’t need complete sentences here, but rather just key words as the idea is to cue yourself so that you know what to write about in any given part of the body of the essay.

I. Fresh ingredients
   A. Small farm produce
   B. Free-range meats
   C. Newly-milled grains

II. Huge portions
   A. Two-hand sandwiches
   B. Big bowls of chunky soup
   C. Pasta refills

III. Expert Seasoning
   A. Salted to taste
   B. Delicate herbs
   C. Synergistic combinations

Now you’ve got a map, an instruction sheet to follow, and there will be no missing or extra parts to worry about. (Check out the helpful outlining exercises on pages 42-47 in your text book.)

You may give even further details in your outline by providing...
5) Specific Details/Examples – 

I. Fresh ingredients
   A. Small farm produce
      1. Crisp romaine lettuce
      2. Red vine-ripened beefsteak tomatoes
      3. Flavorful cave-grown portabella mushrooms

Or you may choose to leave those out of the outline though they will still be necessary in your actual essay.

Specific examples are what make your essay interesting, accessible, and clear to the reader. Sure, Donovan’s has big bowls of soup...

    Donovan’s features big bowls of chunky soup. They are super-sized and contain lots of ingredient-filled soup. Each soup is generously portioned and filling.

...but are you getting hungry just hearing about the fact that they’re big? Not only is this not very compelling, it also isn’t giving the reader enough information, and it’s repetitive. What if the essay were to elaborate about those bowls of soup? After it mentions how big they are, it should get to the specifics:

    Donovan’s features big bowls of chunky soup. Steaming French onion soup is served in massive tureens in which savory brown broth is loaded with big petals of onion and topped with a thick layer of melted gruyere cheese. Luscious New England clam chowder is presented in an oversized crock stuffed with freshly shucked clams and new potatoes in a velvety, peppery cream sauce. Minestrone is brought to the table in the pot it’s cooked in, and the tangy red bouillon packed with pasta and chunks of onion, celery, tomato, zucchini, and mushrooms is ladled out generously.

Are you hungry yet? Your test graders will be looking for such specific examples and will look upon them favorably when they get back from dinner at Donovan’s. (Pages 60-66 in your book discuss specific details.)

Once your support is in place and fleshed out with appropriate detail, your reader should have a good understanding of what you’re trying to say in your essay, but there’s one more thing to consider. In order to get from one support point to another or even from one example to another, there is usually a need for a bridge of some sort to let the reader know that you’re making that switch. These bridges are called...
6) Transitions

Imagine that you’re having a conversation with a friend, and it goes something like this:

Fred might be left scratching his head after this, trying to figure out what your pizza preference has to do with Indiana Jones as he reaches for his cell phone to dial up the men in white coats. But, what if the conversation went like this instead:

Does this one seem a bit more logical? There’s definitely a bridge, now, between the part about the Indiana Jones movie and the part about pizza, so it makes more sense. In the same way, you want to form these bridges, these transitions, between items of support in your essay. Often this can be done using a transitional word, such as “additionally” or “finally.”

The following examples represent the beginning (topic) sentences of the second and third body paragraphs in the essay about Donovan’s Eats.

- Additionally, Donovan’s offers huge portions of everything served.
- Finally, all of the food at Donovan’s is expertly seasoned.

Transitions can also be done in a more subtle way. The following represents a way that the third body paragraph of Donovan’s Eats might begin:

- Perhaps even more of a reason that the food at Donovan’s Eats tops other diners is the expert seasoning.
By saying “more of a reason,” this beginning brings to the reader’s mind the two reasons you have already discussed, so it is providing a more subtle association with what has already been presented. (Look at pages 83-94 in your book for valuable information about transitions.)

Now your support should have a coherent, logical flow. “What more could there be to this?” you may ask. Well, we’ve not yet discussed what is perhaps the most important step of all,…

7) Revision

Once your essay is written, take a deep breath, pat yourself on the back, and… get back to work!

You’ve got a completed essay to your credit, but now is the time to polish that rough gem.

Are there too many short sentences? Combine them using those handy conjunctions you’ve learned (pp. 124-127), or put verbs and adjectives in series (pp. 129-130). Is your sentence structure too repetitive? Vary the introductions (pp. 127-129).

Do you make lots of fragment errors or run-on sentences or other grammar mistakes? Scan your essay for the types of errors you know you often make.

You may find it helpful to read your essay backwards, from end to beginning, sentence by sentence.

Crazy, you say?

Perhaps, but sometimes it helps to bring each sentence out of context to make it easier to identify mistakes.

All of the pieces of the puzzle should be coming together now, but what about before the test? Good preparation will not only help you write a better essay, it will make you feel more confident, and your text is an excellent source of information, so before the test, be sure to…
8) Study

You’re familiar with the term, aren’t you? Perhaps you even engage in this rare activity from time to time. Your book has excellent information and practice exercises covering the whole essay writing process. Just reread (You have read them at least once, right?) Chapters 1-6. You’ll see great coverage of everything discussed here as well as discussion of introductions, conclusions, and titles. Your book also contains grammar lessons and practice.

There is even a list of commonly misspelled words in Chapter 41, and in Chapter 42, you’ll see lists of homonyms and homophones, words that look and/or sound alike and are the bane of spellers worldwide.

You should also review any writing or other exercises on which you’ve received feedback from your instructor. If there are still some writing issues troubling you, visit the English tutors at the Academic Success Center.

Once you’re satisfied that your studies are complete (Are they ever really?), it’s time to...

9) Plan

Set up a basic timeframe in your mind so that you can pace your essay. In the first round of testing, you are given 50 minutes to write. It’s worthwhile to spend a few minutes at the beginning of the test period to do your prewriting (brainstorming and outlining), but don’t spend too much time at this. You’ll also want to leave yourself a few minutes at the end of the period for proofreading.

The instructor will likely ask you to put away your cell phone no matter how cool your ringtone is, so bring along a wristwatch if you wish to monitor the time, but don’t get too caught up in clock-watching, or you’ll find yourself spending too much time watching the time go by.

Be sure to bring along two good pens which write in blue or black ink. It can be disruptive to your thought process if your only pen runs out during the test, and you have to ask for another which may not even be available. Nothing is more tragic than trying to write an essay without a pen.

Don’t count on writing a second draft. There really isn’t time in a 50-minute period to do that successfully, and you’ll likely be caught with a partly-finished draft. Instead, cross out mistakes cleanly, and write above the cross-outs.

Now that your plan is in place, there are just a few last...
Here are a few final words of advice:

*Buy low and sell high!* Ah... (ahem) ...sorry. That’s the wrong list.

- **Get a good night’s sleep before the test; it’s important that you be alert and able to maintain a sharp focus.** Besides, snoring during the test won’t win you any new friends.

- **Remember to bring blue or black ink pens with you.** You may imagine that graders are delighted with your chartreuse ink and become giddy and lenient. In fact, they will grumble and begin thinking of the leftover spinach-anchovy pizza awaiting them at home.

- **Eat something light about a half hour before the test begins; you don’t want hunger to distract you, but you also don’t want a heavy meal or too much sugar to weigh you down and make you tired.** Good choices are fruit or yogurt. Turkey dinners are right out.

- **Don’t be late!** It will stress you out, and the instructor may not let you take the test. Arrive a few minutes early so that you can compose yourself and get into a relaxed state. Be cautious not to achieve Nirvana during this time, though, as the test may become irrelevant to you.

- **Write legibly!** The grader must be able to read your essay, so print if necessary. If you are the only one who can read your writing, you may be a shoo-in for medical school, but you need to conquer this hurdle first.

At this point, you’re likely realizing that the test isn’t quite so scary as you thought, and you’re right; it’s something you can do. So, there’s nothing left to say, but good luck, and be sure to send me a fruit basket when you’re famous!

—Ron Anselowitz, Revised July 2010
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