

English Final Exam Strategies (Reading responses)

Time management and a planned approach can take a lot of the anxiety out of high-stakes in-class essays, including your common English final. Don't waste energy worrying—use it to develop a plan.

Create a timetable

Start by knowing how much time you have. Allow yourself time to complete four main tasks: read & annotate, brainstorm & organize, write, edit & proofread. You may need to allow yourself extra time to understand the reading, while someone else may need more time to develop the organization. Here is an example timetable:

<i>Total test time: 3 hours</i>	
<i>read/annotate</i>	<i>30 min.</i>
<i>brainstorm/organize</i>	<i>40 min.</i>
<i>write</i>	<i>90 min.</i>
<i>edit & proofread</i>	<i>20 min.</i>

Read & annotate

First, read the prompt (the directions) *actively*, underlining key words such as *explain*, *describe*, or *evaluate*. Now, *actively* read the article. Chunk it into sections, marking topic sentences and main ideas. Make notes in the margin to summarize, paraphrase, and record your own thoughts and reactions. If you need to, look up words you do not know (non-electronic dictionaries are allowed). Paraphrase the author's overall main idea.

Brainstorm & organize

You need to 1) summarize the article, 2) construct a thesis statement that answers the prompt, 3) write body paragraphs that offer several reasons why you think that, and 4) develop those paragraphs with explanations and examples to support your reasons. You may also use facts or quotes from the article.

To summarize, use your reading notes to paraphrase the author's main idea(s) with a signal phrase:

In "Romeo and Juliet" has led us astray," Andrew Trees says that we shouldn't place so much importance on romance when we choose a life partner. He says some romantic people make terrible spouses, and that arranged marriages are often more likely to succeed than those based on romance.

Next, construct your own thesis to respond to the prompt and began to brainstorm reasons and evidence to support it. Use any brainstorming method that works for you, such as a cluster, a list, or an informal outline:

I agree with Trees that romantic feelings don't make a good basis for a marriage. Respect and shared values are a better foundation for a long lasting relationship.

<u>reasons why I think this</u>	<u>evidence/explanations/examples</u>
<p><u>point 1</u> <i>romantic feelings come and go</i></p>	<p><i>*People often have many romantic partners. *Cheating comes from following feelings. *"the chemical attraction that many people rely on to choose a partner has been found to fade 'to neutrality' in two-to-three years." (Trees)</i></p>
<p><u>point 3</u> <i>have to share values: right & wrong, what's important</i></p>	<p><i>*Values come from family, culture, religion *Values are more stable & long-lasting *Children need stability to thrive</i></p>

~~grandmother's husband died young~~
~~In wartime couples are separated~~
point 2 respect takes over when you don't feel all
that loving

*You can decide to act considerate.
*It has "far more to do with things we take for
granted, such as asking your spouse about his or
her day." (Trees)
*Life is less of a roller-coaster of feelings.

This student thought about which of his reasons should come first, second, and last—and notice that he changed the order. He also lined out ideas that seemed unrelated or less strong (not all your ideas will be equally strong, either). He even found evidence in the reading to support two of his reasons.

Whatever method you use, continue brainstorming until you have decided 1) what your precise *opinion* is, 2) your *reasons* and *what order* you will put them in, and 3) what *evidence* you will use.

Your opinion is your thesis

The opinion you develop during brainstorming becomes your thesis statement. It follows the summary:

In "Romeo and Juliet has led us astray," Andrew Trees says I agree with Trees that romantic feelings don't make a good basis for a marriage; respect and shared values are more important.

Your reasons become topic sentences/body paragraphs

Start a new paragraph, making your point one into a clear, simple topic sentence (*Romantic feelings are not a good foundation for a relationship because they come and go so unpredictably.*). Use the evidence you listed on the right and fully explain your thinking. Do the same with your second and third points.

Don't repeat yourself to make your essay longer. Think of your essay as a straight arrow, with a starting point and an ending point, *not* a circle! If you need to develop your ideas more, try asking yourself questions like these: *What are the consequences of my opinion? What should people do? How will it make things different?*

For a simple conclusion, you may restate your thesis *using different words*. You may also call on people to do something, point out the consequences of something, or reflect on the significance of something.

Edit and proofread

If you take the time to plan your essay and keep an eye on the clock, you will have time to carefully proofread. To make changes, draw a single line through a word or phrase and write in the blank line above it. To make a longer change or addition, use arrows and write on the back side of the paper.

Read your essay slowly several times, once just for the ideas and then again for *each type* of error you typically make: if you tend to write fragments, for example, read your essay once just for fragments, nothing else. If you mistake *there*, *their*, and *they're*, or *were* and *where*, scan slowly again for those words and make a decision about each. Now read *again*, imagining you are someone else, to see if you can add any signal phrases that would smooth out the transitions from one idea to the next. Now read *again* to see if your changes are working.

Be the last to leave

Use all your time and aim to be the last to leave; an in-class essay is not a race. Don't worry about what other people are doing—there are always a few students who simply give up and turn in their essays half-written. The ones who give up may be the ones who came in without a plan. You will not be one of those.

Contributed by Rosemary McKeever



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