Most of the writing assignments you will encounter as a student, such as doing book reviews, preparing abstracts of articles, or answering in-class essay examinations, will use the writing skills you have already learned. But many of these assignments will require special formats. They are best approached by using the step-by-step processes explained in this chapter. The guidelines presented are those commonly and successfully used by most students. In Figure 11-1 you will find a successful in-class essay. Read it over to see its strengths: a clear thesis, a logically progressing argument, and strong topic sentences in the body paragraphs. Observing the practices on the following pages will help you, too, to succeed.

**Writing Timed Essay Examinations**

Usually, in-class essay examinations require some analysis, not just repetition of a bunch of memorized facts. It is therefore important to do more than just leaf through your notes the night before the test. Thinking of possible test questions can be a fruitful way to spend your study time. After reviewing the chapters from the texts and your class notes, make up some questions your teacher might ask. Try to invent questions that relate various facts to one another. You might base them on the following:

- Points that your teacher has emphasized in class.
- Points that "sum up" the meaning behind what you are studying.
- Points that relate the current information to that studied during previous weeks.
- Points that compare with or contrast to other points in the same chapters or units.

Without looking at the texts or your notes, develop a thesis sentence that responds to each question. For every thesis, outline in your head or better yet jot down on paper all the information you need to support it. When you have done so, go back and look up any facts that you were unsure of or did not know. Naturally, the number of questions you should think of depends on the type and amount of material to be covered by the test. Keep at it until you are satisfied. Just remember that knowing a lot of facts will not help you very much unless you also know how to use them.
Question: How does Wilson develop the theme of conservation throughout *Biophilia*? Cite relevant passages.

"Constant Advance"

In *Biophilia*, Edward Wilson offers his extended definition of "biophilia." In the body of the book, however, Wilson presents a new facet of biophilia with each chapter. He expands the traditional definition from being a simple "innate tendency" to an evolution of thought that brings humanity to an understanding of nature and how humanity relates to nature, or should: the conservation ethic.

In the prologue, Wilson defines "biophilia" as the "innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes." The first chapter focuses on Wilson's own experience of and reason for studying nature. Wilson is intrigued by the wonder of nature and what it has to offer. From Wilson's scrutinizing eye, nature is seen as a "biological maelstrom of which only the surface could be scanned by the naked eye." As a scientist, Wilson longs for a feeling of "constant advance" in his quest for understanding nature. Nature gives Wilson a mystery to solve and an infinite number of questions to answer. In the tradition of Star Trek, it is the final frontier.

Through Wilson's quest for an understanding of nature, several realizations have resulted, which he reflects in the later chapters of *Biophilia*. His study of individual organisms has begun to encompass a more global

Considering possible questions can help you in more ways than one. While trying to "psych out" what may be on the test, you will also be learning the material and, more important, gaining an understanding of it. This preparation should lessen your anxiety about the examination, since you will be sure that you know how to answer some of the questions you might be asked. It should also make you confident that you can rearrange the information you have studied in any new combinations that might be required. Besides, you may be lucky and think of a question that actually is on the test.
meaning. An ant is no longer an individual ant; rather, it is a vital part of a “superorganism”; an ant colony which relies upon the effort of every ant to survive. This interlocked relationship, however, is not limited to a single species. Rather, this dependent relationship transcends species boundaries and creates an interdependent sphere called “nature.” Wilson finds that “a few of the species were locked together in forms of symbiosis so intricate that to pull out one would bring others spiraling to extinction.” It is this connection that people must recognize with nature, though the links appear more distant than they might between certain other species.

In realizing the interdependent relationship of species, Wilson elevates the value of nature. No scientist can truly predict what the continual degradation of species will eventually lead to. Wilson does know, however, that “deep mines of biological diversity will have been dug out and carelessly discarded.” Each time a species is lost, a question is left unanswered and a piece of the genetic pool is forgotten. Finally this leads Wilson to say: “The phylogenetic continuity of life with humanity seems an adequate reason by itself to tolerate the continued existence of apes and other organisms. This does not diminish humanity—it raises the status of nonhuman creatures. We should at least hesitate before treating them as disposable matter.”

Wilson brings “biophilia” up from an “innate tendency” to a realization of the conservation ethic through observation and respect of nature. “Biophilia” can be described as an evolution of thought. Through observation and reflection, “the natural world becomes a refuge of the spirit, remote, static, richer even than human imagination.”

**Studying in Groups of Students**

Collaboration at this point—once each student has reviewed the material—is generally a good idea. Classmates can divide up the material with you (make sure you do so in a manner that requires all students to at least skim all the materials before the test) so that not everything will need to be read as thoroughly. In the case of “sharing” the material this way, be sure that the student who leads the discussion brings questions to the group and elicits feedback from them rather than just reporting to them and having everybody copy down what is said. Group
study is most effective when it is based on true collaboration, including discussion and debate. The value of group work is the multiple perspectives that can arise to clarify what’s being studied. Working with well-prepared friends can strengthen your critical reading skills and boost your ability to respond effectively to challenging test questions.

**Approaching the Test**

Prewriting is important in all writing assignments, but it is especially necessary for in-class essays, during which you rarely have enough time to recopy. The secret to doing well on essay examinations is to budget your time carefully. Up to about one-third of the time allotted for the examination should be spent in prewriting. Save five or, at the most, ten minutes at the end for proofreading and correcting errors, and spend the remaining time actually writing.

For an exam that requires one essay to be written in an hour, allow fifteen to twenty minutes of preparation and prewriting. Some tests may include a passage that you are supposed to read; others may ask you to select your topic from two or more alternatives. Include the time needed for reading or for deciding on a topic in your prewriting allowance. As soon as you have devised your thesis and a scratch outline, get to work on the essay. You should spend about half an hour writing the essay, making sure to leave five or ten minutes for proofreading. If the exam is longer than an hour, allow more time for writing the essay.

For an exam that requires several short essays, you may want to allot time for each according to its relative importance. Often the instructor indicates the importance of specific questions by mentioning the number of possible points awarded for each essay or the amount of time that should be spent on it. If not, you may need to estimate for yourself the relative importance of each question by gauging just how much you will have to write in order to answer it fully. Naturally, you would not want to spend forty minutes answering a rather limited question only to find that you have left yourself only twenty minutes to answer two questions that demand greater probing. If you think all the questions will be scored equally, allow equal time for each answer. Spend the bulk of your time on writing out the answers to the questions, but still give five minutes or
so to jotting down notes before you begin working on especially complex questions.

Remember, you should aim for only one draft during any timed essay examination.

**Writing the Test**

*Step One*

The first step in writing an essay examination should always be to read the question carefully. What does it ask you to do? To find out exactly, underline the key words in the directions. These will give you clues as to:

- The *arrangement* of your answer (discuss, analyze, criticize, tell, explain, trace, outline, cite evidence for, justify, clarify, exemplify, and so on).
- The *content* of your answer (why, what, which, how, when, the effects of, the causes of, the value of, the significance of, the reasons for, and so forth).

Next, underline the key words dealing with the subject matter of the question. These will help ensure that your answer includes all the aspects of the topic the question asks for. Take a look at the following test question:

Tell about the three effects of urbanization on Latin American politics during the industrial revolution.

The key words in the directions are *tell* (the arrangement the question asks for) and *three effects* (the content the question asks for). The key words about the subject matter are *urbanization on Latin American politics during the industrial revolution*.

Not all questions are so easily underlined. Many are made up of several sentences. Check out the following example. All the key words are underlined. Notice that most of them occur in the last sentence.

*Ayn Rand's conception of the value of selfishness has met with considerable criticism not only from socialist theorists but from conservatives as well. In light of these criticisms and contemporary international economic and political affairs, discuss what you consider to be the principal inaccuracies in Rand's philosophy.*

*Step Two*

Next, form a question from the key words you have underlined. If the test topic is already a one-sentence question, you will not need Step Two. However, for longer test questions, use all of the key words to compose a one-sentence question. Doing so will probably remind you
of the steps for forming thesis statements explained in Chapter 2. Actually, the process is very much the same. From the limited subject defined by the key words, you compose a focused question that you will later phrase into a thesis. The preceding test topic might become the following question:

In light of the criticisms of both socialist and conservative theorists, can the principal inaccuracies in Ayn Rand's conception of the value of selfishness be demonstrated through current international political and economic affairs?

Step Three
The third step is to turn the question formed from the key words into a thesis statement:

In light of the criticisms of both socialist and conservative theorists, the principal inaccuracies in Ayn Rand's conception of the value of selfishness can be demonstrated through current political and economic affairs.

Step Four
Now you can write the body of your essay. You may be able to organize the essay in your head, or you may want to jot down a scratch outline. Begin writing by placing your thesis statement as the first sentence. Then present your first point. After making the first point, go on to the second. After the second, make the third. It's that simple to be organized.

The most important parts of an in-class essay are a strong and relevant thesis and good topic sentences with plenty of supporting examples. Transitions, while still important, are not as vital as in writing in which your time is not so limited. Most of the coherence of your essay will depend on appropriate paragraphing and a logical presentation of your ideas. Usually, the introduction should be pared down to a concise statement of your thesis, and your conclusion should be merely a quick summary.

Good in-class writing should always be concise. Padded answers are detectable right away. They contain vague, wordy sentences supported by only a few concrete examples, and they may even contain irrelevant information. Here are some suggestions for making your answers concise:

Avoid digressions. Make sure everything you say clearly supports your thesis or one of the points proving it.

Avoid unsupported generalizations. Make specific statements you can back up with examples and analysis of examples; avoid relying only on feelings.

If you absolutely do not know the answer to a question on a test, blame your failure on inadequate studying, fate, or whatever seems likely and
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Avoid unsupported generalizations. Make specific statements you can back up with examples and analysis of examples; avoid relying only on feelings.

If you absolutely do not know the answer to a question on a test, blame your failure on inadequate studying, fate, or whatever seems likely and
MOVE ON to the next question. There is no reason to waste time on what you don't know when you could be using the time to do an excellent job on another part of the exam. Nevertheless, if you know part of the answer to a question, do your best to present what you do know. Many teachers will give partial credit for such answers, especially if they are well written.

*Step Five*

Spend the last five minutes or so reading over what you have written and making any minor corrections you find necessary. Grammatical consistency, correct spelling, and proper mechanics are, of course, important, but occasional slips of the pen are usually judged less harshly in impromptu writing than in out-of-class essays.

Well-written answers to in-class essay examinations look like and sound like any other essay you would write. The transitions may not be as smooth and the overall structure may seem more mechanical, but your general writing abilities will suffice. Just remember to budget your time and respond directly to the question.

*Short-Answer Essay Examinations*

Sometimes an essay examination will be made up of several short questions that ask you to define specific terms, to tell the function of characters in a literary work, or to identify people in history. To answer these questions, compose a well-developed paragraph for each one. Following the same five steps as you would for longer essay questions will ensure that your answers are complete.

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**Exercises**

A. Underline the key words in the questions below and state how the contents of a good thesis sentence would reflect them.

1. Compare and contrast the role of women in Reconquest Spain and Aztec Mexico. What is the significance of the similarities and differences in the way they were treated.

2. Ancient Athenian democracy is often described as "participatory," whereas modern democracies (such as the ones found in the United States, Canada, or Britain) are often described as "representative." What are the crucial differences between these two types of democracy? Which type is more faithful to the literal meaning of "democracy"? Explain.

3. "A lover must desire immortality along with the good, if what we agreed earlier was right, that Love wants to possess the good forever. It follows from our argument that Love must desire immortality" (Symposium 207a). What do you think Socrates and Diotima mean when they agree that a lover wants to possess the good forever and hence that a lover must desire immortality? Can you find examples in modern life to support their views or do you think their views are unpersuasive?