

Plan First, Write Later

**Bonus
Chapter**

In This Chapter

- What to expect from the essay topic
- Brainstorm before writing
- Organization and logical thinking
- Planning your time

You may be saying, “I never was any good at writing” or “My writing stinks.” Not so! If you can think, you can write. You’ve not reached the age you are without collecting a lot of information and many odd tidbits of facts and some theories as well. This chapter will help you organize some of the ideas that you do have into a successful essay.

This chapter will show you how to develop your essay. Granted, you probably would not write about the same things as you find in this chapter. Nevertheless, here you will see how to move from the essay prompt to developing a possible thesis sentence for your introduction, writing probable body paragraphs, and then going back to finish the introduction and finalize the essay with a conclusion.

The Essay Topic

You are probably asking yourself what in the world you will write about. Perhaps you were often frustrated when a teacher told you to just “write an essay,” with no guidance on the topics you could develop. This is *not* the case on the GED. The GED will provide you with an *essay topic* to expand upon.

Remember that many people from different backgrounds take the GED. Therefore the topics will be ideas that every one of the GED candidates will be able to say something about. These essay topics may be suggested to you generally or perhaps suggested to you in the form of a quotation. It doesn’t matter if you’ve never heard of the person who said the words originally; this is just another way of introducing an issue. Any topic that the GED wants you to develop in an essay will be an idea that you can write about.



DEFINITION

An **essay topic** is an essay prompt. It is the subject (*topic*) you are being *prompted* to write about.

Here's an example of a possible essay topic you might be given:

Anne Frank wrote in her diary: "How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world." How can ordinary people start improving their world? What are some everyday things that we can do to make the world better?

Notice that the question asks about "ordinary people" and "everyday things." No one is expecting you to find the solution to world hunger or develop alternative fuels. The GED wants to hear from *you*. Just think about what you and others like you can do to improve the world.



IN THE KNOW

Remember, the GED essay topics will be subjects that you will have ideas about. The GED essay readers are interested in what *your* thoughts might be about everyday questions and occurrences.

Don't panic when you read the essay topic for the first time. Just take a deep breath and figure out what you would like to say about the essay topic.

Brainstorming Ideas

You will have 45 minutes to write your essay. The best way to start an essay within a limited time frame is to start thinking and jotting down the ideas that occur to you. It does not matter that the ideas seem unrelated and even random. This is brainstorming. Just let the ideas come and jot down the main points of each of them. You can organize, eliminate, and add new thoughts later. Use the margins of your test book or any other blank space to list your ideas.

Limit your brainstorming to about 7 minutes maximum. You need to have enough time to write your essay, and for sure have enough left over to proofread and edit what you've written.

Here are some possible ideas that might come to you about the sample essay topic from earlier: How can ordinary people start improving their world? What are some everyday things that we can do to make the world better?

- Recycle
- Electricity
- Attitude
- Rain garden??
- Food garden
- Light bulbs
- Trash
- Homeless

Home heating/cooling
Food shelf
Neighbors
Cars
Our own personal behavior
Grandma & her friends
Victims of catastrophes (tornadoes, floods, etc.)

What you have here is a list of items and situations that seem vaguely connected with the idea of the world as a better place. Do you see anything more specific about this list? Some items are general (recycle, cars, trash); other items are more specific and personal (attitude, homeless, personal behavior). It will not take long before some sort of pattern or relationship will emerge.

This gives you an idea of what brainstorming for a timed essay is all about. Your list will probably overlap with this one, and you probably have even more and better ideas that occur to you. No matter what essay topic you are given to write about, it will have a couple of key words to guide you in your essay. Look for them and let them help you develop your thinking. The key words to keep in mind for this topic are “ordinary people,” “everyday things,” and “improving the world.”

Organizing Your Ideas

Once you have your ideas on paper, it's time to spend about two to three minutes organizing, combining, and eliminating. Notice how some of the ideas apply to “ordinary people” and “everyday things,” while other points are more general, or they talk about things that you would probably need to research for better understanding.

Look for Logical Patterns

Can you see any sort of logical pattern within the scattered ideas in the preceding section?

- Perhaps recycle and trash can be put together under the topic “recycling.” Recycling has been around long enough for everyone to know something about that topic.
- Unless you know a lot about rain gardens or gardening in general, those ideas should be eliminated.
- Electricity, heating and cooling, light bulbs, and maybe even cars can be lumped under the topic of “environmental awareness.”
- The food shelf, neighbors, grandma and her friends, and personal behavior might be placed under the broader topic of “service.”

Create an Outline

Some of your random list has now been grouped into three major areas: recycling, environmental awareness, and service. These are your three main points, one for each body paragraph. You are ready to create an outline for your essay. Your rough outline might look something like the following:

Introduction/*thesis*—How individual folks can help improve the world in ordinary ways

1st body paragraph—Recycling efforts—personal and general

2nd body paragraph—Environmental awareness—be more protective of the environment

3rd body paragraph—Personal service—how individuals can “reach out” and improve the world

Conclusion—echo of the main point and a more general application of ideas



DEFINITION

A **thesis** is the critical sentence in your introduction that expresses the controlling idea of your paper. It tells your readers what your essay is all about, and indicates to them what they will find in the next few paragraphs.

What we have done is to create a very general outline. You can include as many specifics as you want in your outline, but you must remember that your time is very short. Jot down the basics on whatever free space you can find in your test booklet, or on scrap paper you may have been given. That will be enough.

If you had more than 45 minutes for writing this essay, you would most likely want to spend some time exploring each topic on the internet. But because of the time limit, you have to go with what you know. Some additional ideas will occur to you once you begin to write.

How Long Should Your Essay Be?

Generally speaking, your essay should be about 250 words long. Don't worry about counting your words. Instead, aim for five paragraphs: introduction, three body paragraphs, and the last paragraph, or conclusion. If you are running out of time or have a lack of things to write about and you cannot possibly write five paragraphs, focus on writing at least four good ones: introduction, two well-developed body paragraphs, and the conclusion.

Generally, handwritten essays will be 2½ to 4 pages long, depending on the size of your handwriting. (If you are able to type your essay, it will be shorter, of course.) The length of your essay, however, is no guarantee of quality. The essay readers are looking at your critical thinking as well as your ability to communicate your ideas successfully on paper, not just how many words you can throw down on your answer sheet in 45 minutes.

Time Is of the Essence

The time element is important, of course. You need to keep track of how much time you have left as you approach each part of the writing process. Some of you will have to adjust the times a bit. Remember, these time suggestions for each section are only a guideline—not to make you crazy but to

help keep you on track. The important point is that everyone has a total of 45 minutes, no matter how each person decides to break it up into sections.

Here's a rough guide on how to divide your time:

- Brainstorming and creating a rough outline: 5–7 minutes
- Writing the body paragraphs: 20 minutes
- Writing the introduction and conclusion: 10 minutes
- Proofreading and editing: 5–8 minutes (or more if you have it)
- Doing a final read of your essay: 1–3 minutes



HEADS UP!

Unless you are taking the test online, you will be writing your essay in longhand, so your penmanship must be as neat as possible. If your handwriting is unreadable, then it is okay for you to print. The readers don't care, just so long as they can read what you've written.