

Quick Guide to Writing Under Pressure

Step One: Gather Information

- ✓ If you are preparing for an exam, find out as much as possible about the exam mechanics ahead of time to minimize uncertainty and facilitate your strategic planning.
- ✓ If you are preparing for qualifying exams, discuss expectations, requirements, and questions with your chair and committee members as far in advance as possible.
- ✓ When feasible, ask questions and get perspective from previous test takers in your discipline.
- ✓ Consider organizing a study/preparation group with other students in your class/degree field to keep you motivated and engaged.

Step Two: Plan Your Approach

- ✓ Timed exams still require cohesive content with a clear structure and logical progression of ideas.
- ✓ Maximize your approach by working on prewriting techniques (breaking down the prompt, creating an outline or mind map, deciding on a thesis).
- ✓ Focus on presenting a coherent argument, not just repeating everything you know about a topic.

Step Three: Practice, Practice, Practice

- ✓ Identify your weaknesses and create a plan for developing your pressure-writing techniques.
- ✓ Try to do a few sessions under exam conditions (depending on exam format, this may include not using notes, not listening to music, not breaking for lunch, etc.).
- ✓ Practice exams can be time-consuming but are essential to mitigating nerves and becoming comfortable managing time constraints.

What is a Mind Map?

Mind maps are used to create associative connections between ideas and find balance between the big picture and more specific information. They are usually structured with a main topic/argument at the center of a visual diagram that branches out into associated ideas, key words, evidence, definitions, etc. Mind mapping can be especially helpful when brainstorming under pressure as it helps you to visualize, organize, and connect your thoughts, and ultimately to focus your writing strategy. You can also use a mind map to break down the elements of an essay prompt or as a study guide to make sense of your material.

Start by writing down your central topic or argument in the middle of a piece of paper. You can then use arrows, bubbles, lines, or other linking devices to connect this idea to related concepts that branch out from it. Each of these branches will likely have smaller branches that further elaborate the themes. You might think of it as a central topic → theme → detail structure. Using different colors can also help you find similarities and make connections across topics. Mind maps often reveal logical connections you can use to organize your essay paragraphs.

Sample mind map (Research Question = Topic, Main Idea = Theme, Keyword = Detail)

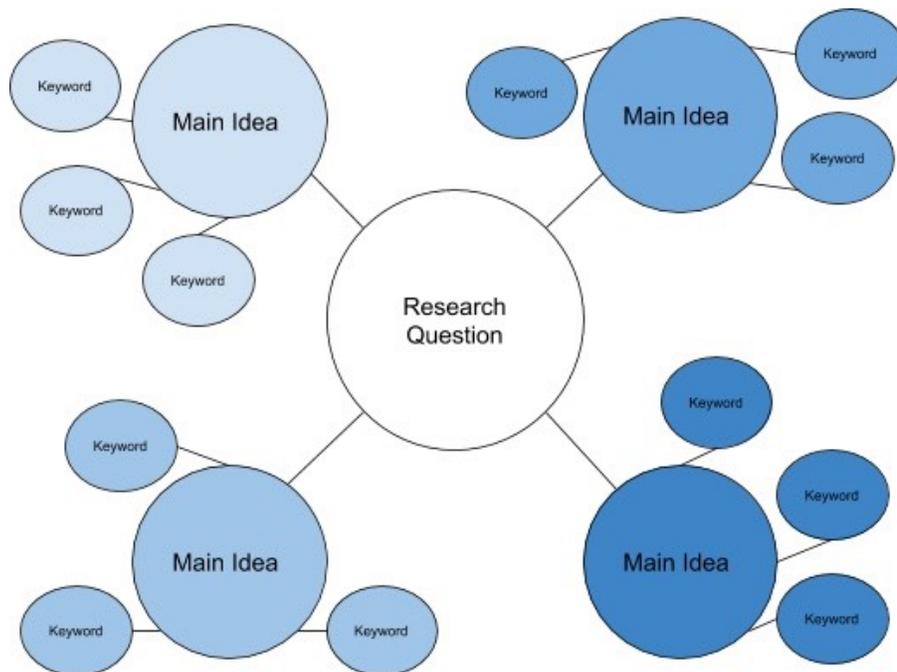


Image from Grand Valley State University Knowledge Market
<https://www.gvsu.edu/library/km/brainstorming-strategy-concept-mapping-21.htm>

Writing Under Pressure – Preparation Worksheet

It may be helpful to revise your answers at various points in your exam prep process. You might fill this sheet out when you first begin studying and again closer to your exam date.

Step One : Get Information

Write down some specific pieces of information you need to seek out to prep for the exam, and the steps you will take to acquire this info (talk to professors, check department requirements, learn how to create a study group, etc.):

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Step Two: Plan Your Approach

Identify your strengths and weaknesses in writing under timed conditions. (For example, you may feel confident coming up with your thesis but struggle with organization). You might also write down your top concerns about taking a timed exam or identify what aspects you feel most comfortable with:

Top Five Strengths / Confidences	Top Five Weaknesses / Concerns
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.

Plan Your Practice Exercises

After identifying your strengths and weaknesses, put them into practice by creating practice exercises for your work. This might include elements like creating an outline or mind map in 5-10 minutes, timing your paragraph writing, or planning your best strategies for incorporating textual or data evidence into your work. Try to plan at least a few practices under simulated exam conditions.

**Tip: Depending on the format of your exam, consider keeping a list of relevant quotations/important data sets from the sources you plan to cite in your responses. Even if you won't have that material in front of you, this can be a helpful process to engage with the ideas frequently until they become second nature.*

Practice Strategy (What do you plan to focus on in your practice exam?)	Practice Exercise Observations (How did you approach practicing this element under pressure? What was the most difficult aspect for you?)	Exam Strategy (What have you learned from your practice exercises that you can utilize in the exam?)