

#11) Taking Essay Examinations

(adapted from Proven Strategies for Successful Test Taking by Thomas Sherman and Terry Wildman;
Writing: A College Rhetoric by Laurie Kirszner and Stephen Mandell)

Prior to the Exam

Study Your Teacher.

Different teachers stress different points, but teachers generally test on the information they stressed in class lecture. Check your notes.

Anticipate Questions.

Ask yourself what types of questions might be asked on the exam. Chances are at least some of your questions will appear on the exam. After generating some possible exam questions, do some warm-up writing to prepare responses.

During the Exam

1. Analyze the question.

The first step in successfully completing an essay exam is to understand the question(s). Many students do not take the time to reason out “what the professor wants” and lose the essay game before they ever start writing. Examine each word in the question to be sure you clearly understand the question; look for key words that indicate how you should answer the question. See the list of key terms below.

2. Brainstorm.

Take time to brainstorm anything related to the question, jotting down ideas. Remember to look for clues to the answer in the question itself.

3. Organize your answer.

Make a rough outline to keep you on track. A well-organized answer facilitates grading and creates a good impression. Your answer should have an introduction, body, and conclusion. Note that in short answers, the introduction and conclusion may be as short as a single sentence. Use transitional words and phrases to help the reader see the connections between your ideas.

4. Budget your time.

Look over your entire examination, noting the point value of each section or question. Budget your time accordingly. For example, an essay question with a value of 25 points should receive more of your time than a 5-point short answer question. Invest your time where you will have the greatest benefit. Bring a watch to the test. Once you have spent the allotted time on a question, wrap it up and move on to the next question.

5. Begin with a thesis you can defend in your essay.

Often you can reword the question itself into an opening statement or even a partial thesis statement. This sentence also can function as your introduction. (See examples of how to accomplish this restatement below.)

6. Use facts to support your argument.

Use the information you learned when you studied for the exam. Use the facts, details, ideas, and/or dates to support the points you make to answer the question. Be as specific as possible. Use details to support a general context and draw relevant conclusions. Take care to explain how your evidence supports your argument.

7. Use appropriate language.

Use the terminology relevant to your topic. Using terms from class discussion, lecture, and the text illustrates your understanding and mastery of the concepts. Additionally, use sentence structures, word choices, and spelling familiar to your writing: the exam is no place to experiment with style. Errors will only distract your reader from what you have to say.

8. Proofread your response.

Read slowly. Make sure you stayed on track answering the question and neatly cross out words or paragraphs if you find you have digressed. It is better to cross out an irrelevant paragraph (and replace it with a relevant one if you have time) than to leave it to distract your reader. Leave time to check for spelling and punctuation.

Key Terms in Essay Questions

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Analyze:	to discuss in detail each part of a whole
Clarify:	to make clear using examples
Classify:	to organize information into groups based on shared characteristics
Compare/Contrast:	to cite both points of similarity and of difference
Criticize:	to point out both the positive and negative sides
Define:	to give a clear, concise meaning for a term
Describe:	to relate something in sequence or story form
Diagram:	to organize in some pictorial way the parts and relationships of a set of facts or ideas
Discuss:	to examine and talk about an issue from all sides; must be carefully organized
Enumerate:	to write in list or outline form; numbering helps
Evaluate:	to make a judgment of negative and/or positive worth using evidence to support your opinion
Explain:	to clarify, to interpret, to analyze; emphasis on cause-effect relationships and sequence
Illustrate:	to show by means of a picture, a diagram, or some graphic aid; to relate specific examples
Interpret:	to explain, translate, or show a specific application of a given fact or principle
Justify:	to tell why a position or point of view is right; should stress the positive

List:	similar to enumerating, but requiring a formal numbering of sequence
Outline:	to organize a set of facts in terms of main points and subordinate points using a formal outline
Prove:	to give evidence, to present facts, to use logic as a basis for clear, forthright argumentation
Relate:	to show how two or more things are connected through similar causation, results, or characteristics
Review:	to reexamine or summarize the key characteristics of an overall body of facts, principles, or ideas
State:	to present a succinct statement of a position, fact, or point of view
Summarize:	to give the main points of an issue in condensed, abbreviated form, without details or examples
Trace:	to present in sequence a series of facts somehow related, in terms of time, order, or cause-effect

Tips for Using the Essay Question as Your Thesis

Many times, you can rewrite the exam questions to use as your thesis. This sentence will function as your introduction, and sometimes as your essay map.

Example 1

If the instructor writes the following prompt for your exam:

Discuss the three values of the American people that are criticized frequently.

The implied question is:

What are the three values of the American people that are criticized frequently?

You could use the following statement as your thesis, introduction, and essay map:

The values of the American people that are criticized most often are indifference to social needs, wastefulness, and dishonesty in business.

Your answer would contain three sections each discussing one of the three areas mentioned in your thesis.

Example 2

If you have the following prompt:

Explain whether you believe that the positive values of the American people outweigh their negative values or that their negative values outweigh their positive values.

The implied question is:

Do the positive values of the American people outweigh the negative values or do the negative values outweigh the positive values?

Your thesis might be:

As an American, I would like to believe that our positive values outweigh our negative values, but I cannot.

Example 3

Your question:

What are the forms of the verb "to be"?

Your thesis:

The forms of the verb "to be" are the following: am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been.