

Essay Exam Preparation

1. About essay questions

Essay questions are designed so that you can demonstrate a depth of knowledge and critical thinking. They are often called "think" or "discussion" questions. Essay questions often require that you make accurate generalizations about a concept and then support your generalization with specific, accurate evidence. Or, you may be required to evaluate specific situations and identify the principle or concept that the situations represent.

For example, in a history course, you could be asked to discuss a leader's effect on his/her country as reflected by his/her ideas on government and economic and foreign policies.

Short answer questions are usually designed to test your ability to present brief explanations backed up by facts. A sample short answer question in a literature course may be, "In a well-organized paragraph, explain Poe's theory of poetry." In a history course you might be asked to list the major provisions of a treaty and briefly explain the significance of each one.

2. Preparing for an essay test

Preparation for an essay test requires in-depth review that occurs throughout the semester. This involves reading and reviewing textbook chapters and lecture notes, creating study guides or summary sheets, preparing practice test questions, and/or completing study guides provided by your professor. The following procedure will help you establish an effective test preparation process for essay exams.

- **STEP ONE: Anticipation**

- Anticipate questions that are likely to be on the test. Use previous tests and your class notes as your basic source material for the following three steps:
- Ask yourself, "What are the CONCEPTS and RELATIONSHIPS involved in the material I am reviewing?" Review your notes, OMITTING DETAIL, for the time being. Review major headings and chapter summaries in your textbook(s).
- Condense your material into a concise outline.
- Add the necessary details to the main concepts in your outline.

- **STEP TWO: Condensation**
 - Organize your material by identifying all major concepts, the subordinate concepts, and all important details. This can be in outline form. Then, create written summaries in your own words.
- **STEP THREE: Practice**
 - Create sample test questions and practice answering them. This is an excellent strategy to use with a study group or with a study partner. You can also practice outlining answers to practice questions.

3. Strategies for taking an essay test

AS YOU BEGIN:

Read the directions - Carefully

Notice whether you must answer all of the questions or whether you can choose which ones to answer.

Read every question before beginning - clarify anything that is confusing.

Select those questions for which you are best prepared and begin with the easiest one.

Make notes alongside each question

Quickly (in about five minutes) note a few key words and phrases alongside each question. List technical terms and names that come quickly to mind, especially for answers that are right on tip of your tongue. This will keep them available later when pressures and anxiety may otherwise block them.

Calculate and budget time for each question

Budget time according to point values for the question. Questions worth more points should be given more time.

The "easy questions"

Work on those questions you are certain you can answer. This helps create confidence and can minimize test anxiety. Leave plenty of space for answering any questions you may have skipped. Following each answer, leave enough space to add any additional ideas that may come to mind as you work through the exam.

The "hard ones"

Do not hesitate too long on a difficult question even if your answer is unsatisfactory. Inaction may block your thinking. Forcing yourself to write increases your chances of recalling the answer. "Free association," or freely jotting down on a piece of scrap paper words that come to mind as you think about the answer may help you overcome blocking

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and remind you of new ideas to be organized into your answer. Try outlining or mapping the ideas that you can think of. You may earn partial credit for at least demonstrating that you have a partial understanding.

COMPOSING YOUR ANSWER:

Note key instruction words in questions

Know the difference between *comment*, *compare contrast*, *evaluate*, *defend*, *demonstrate*, *identify*, and so forth.

Make a skeletal outline before beginning to write

It will save you time and stress by providing direction and helping you avoid repetition. In addition, if you don't have time to finish, you can refer to your outline and probably pick up some partial credit points.

Avoid a flowery introduction

Answer the question directly and forcefully in the first sentence. One of the best strategies is to restate the exam question in your introductory sentence. It is better to write a few summary sentences in answer to each question than to write a great deal about one question and not have enough time left for the others.

Expand your first sentence according to your skeletal outline

Support the main ideas with facts, examples, and reasons. Use the technical terms and references from textbooks and lectures.

Be concise and to the point

Think more and write less. Instructors are more impressed by accurate, concise answers.

Always write something

If you do not know the answer to a question, try to reason it out. You may still get some partial credit.

Summarize and conclude

The introduction of your essay response is the "thesis" or the main point to be made. The summary is simply a paraphrasing of the introduction.

Reread

Check your answers and correct any errors in spelling, grammar, sentence structure or penmanship. Be sure you haven't left out any words, or parts of answers.

*Adapted from Walter Pauk, *How to Study in College*.