



HOW TO TAKE ESSAY EXAMS

(Adapted from materials prepared by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Purdue University, and the *St. Martin's Guide to Writing* (1999))
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Why do Instructors give Essay Exams?

Instructors mainly use essay exams so that you can sort through the large amount of information that you have gained, from your class notes, text and supplementary materials, to determine what is important, and then explain why that information is important. Essay exams require you to practice critical thinking and analytical skills, two important goals of any college instructor. Basically, an essay tells an instructor if:

- You understand the concepts for that particular exam or the overall concepts of the course
- You can use those concepts to interpret specific materials
- You can make connections, see relationships, draw comparisons and contrasts
- You can synthesize information in support of a thesis
- You can argue your own opinions with proof and supporting evidence
- You can justify your own evaluations of a concept
- You can think critically and analytically about a subject

How do I study for an Essay Exam?

Hint: no student can do well on an essay exam if s/he has not kept up with the readings and assignments from the beginning of the course. Also, students must have some idea about the content of the exam before they take it; otherwise, they will not know what to study.

So, how do you become a successful essay exam-taker? The most successful essay exam-takers are well-prepared for the exam because they:

- Keep up with the readings as they are assigned: read everything dictated by the syllabus and the instructor. This may involve reading both your textbook and supplementary books/articles. Since instructors use all materials to compose their exam questions, it is important that you read everything. Also, keeping up with the reading will help you slowly absorb the course content and will help avoid the need for cramming later.
- Go to class: this means every class period, not just once in awhile.
- Take careful notes: take notes in whatever format works best for you. If you have difficulty taking notes in class and then understanding them later, see the **Effective Note Taking** handout listed in the **Research & Study Guides** section of the Library website's **Research Guides** page, which discusses the Cornell Note Taking System, an excellent method of taking notes (under this section, you will also find a list of other similar resources in various formats). The day after you take the notes, go back through them, making adjustments where you forgot to put something during the rush of note taking or finding places where you became confused and thus need to receive clarification next class period from the teacher. Waiting until the night before the exam is *not* the time to go through your notes. By then, it will be too late to clarify any confusing places or issues.
- Organize small study groups: three minds are better than one. Discussing course content with other students helps you catch ideas you might have missed or not understood. This is not cheating. As long as you write your own essay, formulating ideas and sharing notes is okay. In fact, this sharing of ideas

is a big part of the learning process. Being able to explain something to someone else means that you understand it.

- Participate in any discussion sessions offered by the instructor: if an instructor opens up a time either during or outside of class-meeting time, it is imperative that you attend. Sometimes, instructors give hints about exam format and content. Also, during the sessions, other students' questions may lead you to a greater understanding of the content. To get the most out of these sessions, you should go through your notes the night before so you have any questions written down to ask the instructor.
- Study for the Exam: the best studying is *not* done the night before the exam; instead, you should review your notes every day for a week before the exam. Studying for success involves four steps:
 1. Organize your study materials into related groups of ideas/themes;
 2. Don't just memorize aimlessly; clarify the important issues of the course/exam and focus your studying on those major facts/ideas;
 3. Find out what you do not know but need to know so that you can ask the instructor;
 4. Make up test questions and answer them based on which major topics/ideas you believe will appear on the exam and/or answer the sample questions given by the instructor.

How do I respond to an Essay Exam or Discussion question?

1. Read through the questions carefully.

- a. Budget your time: look at how many points each part earns you, and find hints for how long your answers should be. Then, determine how much time you have and how best to use it. Write down the actual clock time that you can use for each section, and stick to it. One strategy is to divide the available time by the percentage worth of the question. You don't want to spend half of your time on something worth only 10% of the total points.
- b. Decide which question(s) you will answer first: (if you have a choice) don't just answer the first question you encounter. Instead, read through all of the options and jot down really brief ideas for each question before deciding. Focus your attention on questions you can explain the most thoroughly.

2. Analyze the Key Words of the exam question.

Determine what you are being asked to do by underlining the active verbs (key words) in each question. Some common key words found in essay exam questions are:

Information words ask you to demonstrate your knowledge on a subject, such as *who, what, when, where, how, and why*.

- Define—give the subject's meaning; tell what it is and what it is not. Give specific characteristics by which a concept/thing/event can be recognized.
- Explain/Discuss/Examine—give reasons why or examples of how something happened.
- Illustrate—give descriptive examples of the subject and show how each example is connected with the subject. Avoid generalizations by giving as many details as possible.
- Summarize—concisely, and in detail, cover the important ideas you learned about the subject.
- Trace—outline how something has changed or developed from an earlier time to its current form.

Relation words ask you to demonstrate how things are connected.

- Compare—show how two or more things are similar (and, sometimes, different).
- Contrast—show how two or more things are dissimilar; compare their differences.
- Apply—use details you have been given to demonstrate how an idea, theory, or concept works in a particular situation.
- Cause—show how one event or series of events made something else happen.
- Relate—show or describe the connections between two or more things.

Interpretation words ask you to defend your own ideas about a subject. These questions require opinion supported by concrete evidence that you can provide from the course's examples, definitions, or concepts.

- **Prove/Justify**—give reasons or examples to show how or why something is the truth.
- **Evaluate/Respond/Assess**—state your opinion of the subject with specific examples and reasons.
- **Support**—state your opinion of the subject and give specific reasons/examples to prove why you hold that belief.
- **Criticize**—disagree with a position presented; give specific reasons/examples to back up your view.
- **Synthesize**—put two or more things together that haven't been put together before; don't just summarize one and then the other and say that they are similar/different. You must provide a reason for putting them together.
- **Analyze**—look closely at the components of something to figure out how it works, what it might mean, or why it is important.
- **Argue**—choose a side of an issue and defend it, with proof, against the other side.

3. Organize your answer by planning your essay's structure & giving proof/support.

- a. **For short-answer ID's/definitions:** skip over any you don't recognize quickly and come back to them when another question jogs your memory. It is usually best to begin this type of answer with a general identifying statement and then move on to describe specific applications or explanations. Two *complete* sentences will almost always suffice.
- b. **For an Essay with several parts:**
 - Use as much as one-quarter of the time you've allotted for the question for brainstorming ideas, determining a thesis, and developing a rough outline. If the question has several parts, number the parts of the question or make a numbered list of the parts so you do not miss one. It is generally a good idea to write a paragraph per part/idea/point.
 - Begin each essay response with a 1-2 sentence thesis that summarizes your answer and lists the main points/ideas you will discuss. If possible, phrase the statement so that it rephrases the question's key terms into a statement.
 - Make sure each paragraph follows the thesis, begins with a main idea, and gives specific proof from the course content to support that thesis. Do not pad your answer just to take up space; write concise, detailed, well-proven paragraphs.
 - Jot down (on your original outline) any new ideas you think of to include in your essay. If the ideas need to be inserted into a paragraph you have already written, write them neatly in the margin, at the top of the page, or on the last page, with arrows or marks to alert the reader to where they fit in your answer.
 - Do not take time to recopy an answer; brainstorm on scratch paper or in the margin. Double-space your answer to leave room for additions, strike through errors/changes with one straight line, and write your answers quickly/ legibly.
 - Watch your time carefully! Follow the plan you determined at the start of the exam! However, if you finish a half-hour essay in 10 minutes, you may need to add more detail/develop some of your ideas more fully. If you run out of time when writing an answer, jot down the remaining main ideas from your outline, just to show that you did know the material and, with more time, would have completed your essay.
 - Conclude with a restatement of your main point and its significance.

4. Go back and review/proofread your answer.

Remember, a good essay exam is:

- a. Focused: Did you answer all parts of the question completely and correctly? Did you avoid rambling and repeating the same idea over and over?
- b. Organized: Did you write a planned essay with a clearly-marked introduction that states the points you will make in the essay, body paragraphs that develop those points laid out in the thesis, and a clearly-marked conclusion which summarizes the material you just covered?
- c. Supported: Did you include as many facts, figures, examples, texts, etc. as possible to prove your points?
- d. Well-written: Did you use proper English? People who write in incomplete sentences are typically perceived as not understanding the exam's content. Legibility is also crucial; your instructor can't grade what s/he cannot read.