

GUIDELINES: ESSAY EXAMS

Writing essay exams presents a unique writing situation which places special demands on the writer. The writer's choices are limited by time, subject, question, audience, and purpose for writing. In addition, the writer addresses a specific audience when writing responses to essay exams, and the writer's purpose is limited to offering precise information.

In addition, writers will have little opportunity to revise responses to exam questions. What would ordinarily stand as an exploratory or working draft now becomes the final draft. Studying beforehand now takes the place of pre-writing or using invention techniques. Although the essay exam situation is unique for all writers, the following provides a guide by which students can adapt their writing to this special task.

READING THE EXAM

Read the instructions carefully; if you have questions, ask the instructor immediately.

If you are asked to write responses for some of the questions on the exam, *don't answer all the questions*. Your instructor will probably read only the required number of answers and disregard the rest; you are seldom going to receive credit for those extra answers.

Read each question carefully before you begin to write.

The cardinal rule for taking an essay exam is to understand precisely what each question is asking. Many students, when faced with an essay exam, look at the questions and then begin to write immediately. These students may end up writing an answer for some other question (perhaps one which they want to write on or were thinking about beforehand) rather than writing an answer to the real question.

As you read each question, pay especially close attention to the verbs--"the directives"--in each question, for example, "compare," "define," "discuss," "describe." Many of these directives will intentionally suggest organizational patterns to guide your writing.

Remember: Most essay questions only provide a subject or delineate a topic; it's up to you to provide a focus for the question. As you read the questions, jot down notes and ideas which might be helpful in your answer. Also, it is very important to understand how each question on the exam relates to the other questions. In this way, you can avoid duplicating information and including material in one answer which may be more suitable for the answer to another question.

PLANNING YOUR ANSWERS

Develop a "plan of attack" for the entire exam.

Once you have read the entire exam carefully and feel that you understand the directions and each question, develop a plan of attack. If you have choices, decide which questions you are going to answer and in what order you will answer them. Plan your time for the entire exam and remember to include time for organizing your answer to each question and time for proofreading your answers.

It is usually best to answer the questions you are most confident about first. This method allows you to be certain to convey the material you know well. In addition, answering those questions first will reassure you and help to jog your memory for other questions.

Remember: Avoid panic. It is very easy to panic and not take the time to plan. You have a better chance of doing well on the exam if you resist the urge to dive right in.

Take time to plan your answer for each question.

For most essay exams, you won't have time for extensive brainstorming or note taking, but you should still take the time to plan each answer. As you read each question, jot down any important points which you want to include in your answer right on the exam itself. Careful planning, including writing a rough outline for each question, will help you to write a more logically ordered and complete response. An outline will act as a guide for you as you write. Also, if you run out of time, your outline will indicate to

your professor the direction in which your answer would have gone, and perhaps you will get some credit for that. If you do run out of time, note this at the end of your response. It can't hurt.

Some students like to title one page of their test booklet an "idea page" and to use this page for making outlines, notes, or for brainstorming or free-writing. Your initial planning might be done on this "idea page," or you might turn to this page when you're stuck and need to scribble in order to dredge up more information for an answer.

WRITING THE ANSWERS

It is vital in your responses to essay exam questions that you write a clear, complete, and readily identifiable thesis statement.

Your thesis statement should meet all the criteria of a good thesis statement for any piece of writing. That is, your thesis should be very specific, limited to a particular aspect of the topic, and should act as a good predictor of the contents and organization of your answer. Again, a strong thesis will help your professor determine the scope and content of your answer immediately. Perhaps more importantly, a good thesis statement will focus the question and help you to bring it under your control.

Write an introductory paragraph which focuses the question and introduces your thesis statement.

An introduction carefully crafted to capture your audience's attention is not an important consideration when writing essay exam responses. You will already have the reader's attention, whether you want it or not. Instead, try to write a very focused introduction that limits the specific areas you are going to address in your answer or indicates the specific tack you will take in your answer. Again, as with a focused thesis statement, a focused introduction will help you to bring the question under control and will reflect how you interpret the question.

Write in carefully constructed, well-ordered paragraphs.

In responses to essay exam questions, most instructors are looking for a clear statement of your ideas and a logical order. For this reason, you should probably organize paragraphs from general to specific so that the instructor can easily find the main point of each paragraph. In other words, the first sentence of each paragraph should be the topic sentence, the main idea of the paragraph, and the most general idea in the paragraph. The topic sentence should be followed by your supporting details.

Back up every generalization you make with evidence from course texts.

Generalizations are meaningless without detailed evidence to back them up. Choose your examples carefully when you are writing essay exam questions. You may be able to think of four or five examples to support your point, but you may only have space and time to include two or three of the most important. Therefore, the details and examples you do include must be carefully selected. If possible, select your supporting evidence ahead of time, when you are studying for the exam. Be sure that your instructor will be ready to accept the source and validity of your evidence; the best way to ensure this is to use evidence from course texts.

Write a conclusion which restates your main idea and summarizes the ideas you have introduced since the opening paragraph.

If you have time to write a conclusion, it should reiterate your thesis and provide a summary of your main points. This will emphasize your key ideas as well as the logic and reasons behind your answer. If you are short of time, simply write a concluding statement which summarizes your answer. In addition, writing answers to an essay exam, you sometimes come up with a new idea or insight or one you have forgotten to include in your response. The conclusion is your last opportunity to include that point.

PROOFREADING YOUR ANSWERS

Always reread and proofread your answers carefully.

In addition to the time that you spend planning your answers and actually writing them, you will also want to save time for proofreading your responses. Professors are interested in reading well-written, clearly organized and technically correct answers. Search through your answers and look for glaring errors such as missing words or important terms which are misspelled. It's also important to check for

complete sentences and paragraphs. If time allows, go back and look for punctuation and other mechanical mistakes.

Resist the temptation, strong though it may be, to leave as soon as you have finished writing your answers. Proofreading will also insure that you evaluate your answers overall and decide whether or not they are complete. Furthermore, rereading your answers may cause you to remember important ideas or points you have forgotten to include.

Remember: In all good writing your task is to put down your best ideas succinctly and concisely, to organize them coherently, and to support them with the most significant and relevant details.

SPECIAL SUGGESTIONS AND WARNINGS

Bring plenty of the appropriate writing supplies.

Bring an extra pen, pencil, eraser, etc. so that if your main one fails, you have a backup. Now that you are a college student, you are expected to bring your own writing supplies to class. Don't annoy your instructor or other students by asking to borrow basic tools.

Avoid "blathering" and bluffing.

Instructors are adept at detecting student "blathering" - empty sentences and paragraphs that don't mean anything or add to an existing argument, but are just tacked on to disguise the author's lack of knowledge or to inflate the size of a thin argument. Bluffing and guessing at answers are also easy for an experienced instructor to detect; if you're wrong, you look silly at best and dishonest at worst. Instructors give no credit for elaboration of the obvious and in fact may be annoyed by having to wade through a lot of nonsense.

If you are hand-writing your exam, write legibly, in dark ink, on one side of the page.

Studies have proven that legible and neat essay exams often receive more credit than messy and illegible answers which include the same information. Rarely will instructors give you the benefit of the doubt because they can't read your handwriting. You are unlikely to receive credit for answers you instructor is unable to read.

If possible, bring food or beverages to long exams.

A long exam tests you physically as well as mentally. Bring snacks and beverages in case you become overly tired or develop low blood sugar and are unable to concentrate. Caffeinated foods and drinks (chocolate, tea, coffee, caffeinated sodas) have been shown to increase concentration and endurance, but only use caffeine in an exam situation if you are accustomed to its effects. In consideration of your classmates, avoid bringing snacks in crackly wrappers or pop-top containers that are likely to disturb other people's concentration.

Sit in your usual seat.

Studies show that you will remember more as you take your exam if you sit in your usual seat in the classroom (if you have a regular seat).