



Taking an Essay Exam

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1. About

You may often be asked in college to take essay exams. In certain ways, the same principles for writing good out-of-class essays apply to writing good in-class essays as well. For example, both kinds of essays are more successful when you:

- take into consideration your purpose, audience and information.
- develop a thesis with support.
- support your assertions with evidence.
- guide your readers with transitions.

However, there are some differences to keep in mind as you prepare to write. The most important one is the purpose for writing. For example, usually you write a research paper to learn more about your selected topic; you write essay exams, however, to demonstrate your knowledge. You are not only conveying information, but also proving to your audience—the examiner—that you have mastered the information and can work with it. In other words, your purpose is both informative and persuasive. The suggestions below will help you keep your purpose in mind as you prepare for and write the essay.

2. Preparing for the exam

Study connections between ideas

Your instructor is not looking for a collection of unrelated pieces of information. Rather, he or she wants to see that you understand the whole picture—how the generalizations or concepts create the framework for the specific facts, and how the examples or details fill in the gaps. So, when you're studying, try to think about how the information fits together.

Prepare practice questions

If your instructor has given you the questions themselves or a list of study questions in advance, practice answering those questions. Otherwise, try to anticipate questions your instructor is likely to ask and practice answering those. At the very least, outline how you would answer the test questions; it's better, however, to actually write out the answers. Then you will know where you need to study more.

3. Taking the exam

While you're taking the exam, remember that it's not simply what you say or how much you say, but how you say it that's important. You want to show your instructor that you have mastered the material and that you can discuss it in a coherent, organized fashion.

Plan your time

Although you will be working under pressure, take a few minutes to plan your time. Determine how many minutes you can devote to each answer. You will probably want to devote most of your time to the questions that are worth the most points, perhaps answering those questions first. On the other hand, you might want to answer first the questions that you are best prepared for.

Read the questions thoroughly

Before writing each essay, take a few minutes to read the question carefully to determine exactly what you are being asked to do. Most essay exam questions, or "prompts," are carefully worded and contain specific instructions about what you are to write about as well as how you should organize your answer. The prompt may use one or more of the following terms. If you see one of these terms, try to organize your essay to respond to the question or questions indicated. You might want to underline or highlight the sentences in the prompt that contain these terms to help you focus on them as you write your answer.

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|-------------------|--|
| <i>Classify:</i> | Into what general category does this idea belong? Into what categories can this idea be divided? |
| <i>Compare:</i> | What are the similarities among these ideas? What are the differences? |
| <i>Contrast:</i> | What are the differences between these ideas? |
| <i>Critique:</i> | What are the strengths and weaknesses of this idea? |
| <i>Define:</i> | What does this word or phrase mean? |
| <i>Describe:</i> | What are the important characteristics or features of this idea? |
| <i>Evaluate:</i> | What are the arguments for and against this idea? Which arguments are stronger? |
| <i>Explain:</i> | Why is this the case? |
| <i>Identify:</i> | What is this idea? What is its name? |
| <i>Interpret:</i> | What does this idea mean? Why is it important? |
| <i>Justify:</i> | Why is this correct? Why is this true? |
| <i>Outline:</i> | What are the main points and essential details? |
| <i>Summarize:</i> | Briefly, what are the important ideas? |
| <i>Trace:</i> | What is the sequence of ideas or order of events? |

Plan your answer

Jot down the main points you intend to make as you think through your answer. Then, you can use your list to help you stick to the topic. In an exam situation, it's easy to forget points if you don't write them down.

Write out your essay, using good writing techniques.

As we said earlier, exam essays are like other essays, so use the same good writing strategies you use for other kinds of writing. Keep in mind that your purpose is to persuade your reader—the examiner—that you know the material.

First, create a thesis for your essay that you can defend. Often, you can turn the questions stated or implied in the exam into an answer and use it as your thesis. This sentence also functions as an introduction. For example, suppose you are given the following prompt in your psychology class:

Define “procedural knowledge” and describe its relationship to the results of studies of amnesic patients.

The implied question is:

What is “procedural knowledge” and how is it related to the results of studies of amnesic patients?

Note how you can turn the answer to that implied question into the thesis of your exam essay. This paragraph might serve as your introduction.

“Procedural knowledge” is knowing how to perform a task, such as tying a shoe or driving a car, and studies of amnesia have shown that this type of knowledge or memory is often retained by amnesic patients. Even in amnesic patients who have lost most of their declarative memory capacity, the ability to form new procedural memories is often intact....

Then, proceed immediately to explain, develop, and support your thesis, drawing upon materials from texts, lectures, and class discussions. Be sure to support any and all generalizations with concrete evidence, relevant facts, and specific details that will convince your reader that your thesis is valid. Make your main points stand out by writing distinct paragraphs, and indicate the relationship between them with transitions.

For example, in response to this prompt from a social work class,

Identify and give an example of four alternative solutions available in cases of family conflict.

a student wrote the following paragraph. Note the transition phrase (“the fourth alternative”) and the generalization supported by specific evidence

... The fourth alternative open in cases of family conflict is violence, and this is not an uncommon response. Twenty-five percent of all homicides in the U.S. involve one family member killing another; half of these are spouse homicides. Violence usually takes one of two forms: explosive or coercive. Explosive violence is not premeditated. When the son takes and crashes the family car, for instance, the father may explode and beat him. Coercive violence, on the other hand, is pointed and intentional; it has the goal of producing compliance or obedience. Thus, a blow delivered with a threat not to repeat certain behaviors would be coercive. ...

Finally, sum up your argument with a brief conclusion that lends your essay a clear sense of closure.

5. Finishing the exam

Reread your answer

Reserve a few minutes after completing your essay to reread it. First, make sure you've answered the question. Always answer all parts of the question asked, without digressing. If you find that you've strayed from the point of the essay, neatly cross out the words or paragraphs that are irrelevant. It's better to cross out a paragraph that's irrelevant (and to replace it with a relevant paragraph, if you have time) than to allow it to stand. Quality is always preferable to quantity. Also check your sentence structure, spelling and punctuation.

For free help at any stage of the writing process, contact us at the following address:

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