

HOW TO TAKE ESSAY EXAMS

Whenever you take an essay exam, answer the questions asked, and not some others. To answer on focus, carefully observe the wording of each question. For example, if the question begins “Why does . . . ,” be sure to explain *why* the subject indeed *does*; do not just describe *what is done*. Also, don’t forget to answer all parts of the questions. For instance, if the question asks you to describe a historical event and then tell why it is a significant event, you must both describe and *tell why* if you want to receive full credit for your answer. Remember that a principal cause of low grades on essay exams is that many students do nothing but write a synopsis, without ever answering the questions asked.

To make sure that you are answering the questions asked, you must know what the key words mean. The key words are often verbs: *analyze, discuss, cite, several instances, compare, explain, trace*. However, find the important nouns as well: “What are the *main features* . . . ?” “What is the *significance* . . . ?” “Which of the two positions is . . . ?” (See the lab handout entitled “Important Words in Essay Questions.”)

Before You Begin:

Carefully read through all of the directions and questions. If you are asked to choose which question(s) to answer, make that choice first. Then, as you are answering other questions, you may remember material to use in answering a different question later on.

Plan your test time. Budget your time for each part in proportion to the point allotment and difficulty of the questions. If questions are of unequal value or complexity, make comparable adjustments in the amount of time that you spend on each question. If the exam asks you to answer more than two or three essay questions, a one-paragraph response is often adequate for each question. In contrast, if the exam asks you to answer only one or two questions, plan to write a five-paragraph essay to develop each of your responses. Allow 5-10 minutes at the beginning of the testing period for organizing your thoughts, and allow about the same amount of time at the end for proofreading your answers.

Always think before writing your answers. In the first few minutes (approximately 5 minutes for a one-hour testing period), brainstorm on scratch paper (if you’re allowed to use scratch paper) or in the margins (if you’re not). Write down key ideas so that you will not forget important points while you are composing your essay answer; these words and phrases will serve to stimulate other ideas. Rapidly jot down specifics, facts from your reading and lectures, to use in your answer. Then sort your notes, discarding any items that are irrelevant. Organize by numbering the items, even if you do not have time to make a true outline, because numbering helps you arrange an answer quickly. By rushing into writing, you may end up writing an unorganized answer full of excess wordage which is time-consuming but worth nothing. On the other hand, by spending a few minutes in organizing before you write, you will write clearer, more effective, more complete essay answers.

As You Write:

Take time to use good English and to write legibly. Particularly on essay questions, students often lose points when instructors cannot read the answers. Each instructor must grade thirty to sometimes ninety tests, and the instructor may just subtract points in frustration. Remember that neat, well-written papers tend to be scored higher than sloppy, poorly-written ones.

Begin with the easiest question. This will help to build your confidence and your momentum. Also, ideas about more difficult questions may occur to you as you write the easier essays. As ideas about other questions occur to you, immediately jot them down on scratch paper or in the margin before those thoughts slip away.

Consider starting your answer by using the key words from the question in a controlling generalization or assertion. In other words, try turning the question into your topic sentence (for one-paragraph answers) or your thesis statement (for longer essays). For example, if a question reads, "What were three main reasons for the Civil War?", you would begin, "Three main reasons for the Civil War were . . .", and you would name your three reasons. The rest of your essay answer would further develop each of the three reasons. Beginning your answer in this manner has many advantages: (1) the first sentence is usually the hardest to write, (2) the beginning sentence then helps you to logically organize the body of the paper, and (3) if you run out of time, your instructor will get an idea of what you had in mind to write, and you will probably receive at least partial credit for the answer.

After writing your topic sentence or thesis statement, write out your outline in sentence form, leaving plenty of space to fill in the details in between the outline items. This procedure has several advantages: (1) it relieves some of your anxiety about getting your first thoughts down on paper, (2) it actually organizes the essay for you, and (3) if you run out of time, your instructor can see that you knew and had organized the major points, and you will probably receive more credit than you would have received for just writing your topic sentence or thesis statement.