

STRATEGIES FOR WRITING AN ESSAY EXAM

PREPARING FOR THE EXAM:

Anticipate which questions the instructor might ask and plan answers for those questions. Use notes and assigned readings to formulate questions, remembering that essay questions test more than one's memory for basic facts. Typically, instructors want students to demonstrate a clear understanding of major concepts and ideas and to extend and apply that knowledge in the essay answer.

STUDY TIP: Try creating a brief sentence outline when preparing responses to exam questions. In the outline, focus on the main points that should be included in the essay and the specifics that are needed to support each main point.

WRITING THE ESSAY EXAM:

1. **Before planning or writing an answer, read through the whole exam first.** As you read through the question, jot down any information that comes to mind.
2. **Budget your time.** Make sure you allot roughly the same amount of time to answer each question on the test. **First answer the question that you know best.**
3. **Read each question carefully and determine exactly what you are being asked to do.** Underline cue and key words in the question and any specific writing instructions.
4. **Plan before you write.** Take a few minutes to jot down ideas and then structure your answer by creating a brief outline which includes main and supporting points.
5. **Examine the information you have listed and develop a thesis for the essay question. State your thesis in the first sentence and summarize any key points early in the essay.** Support generalizations or main points with specific details.
6. **Stay on the topic.** Answer only the question asked; don't wander off in new areas. Most instructors prefer clear, well-structured answers. They don't appreciate filler.
7. **Allot enough time to reread, revise, and edit all your answers.** Carefully read each word you have written and neatly make any corrections needed.

The following information was adapted from The Allyn & Bacon Handbook. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1994. 745.

To write good answers to essay questions, a writer must clearly understand the meanings of the key words used in the question. If a question asks that you describe an event, then simply relaying background information may satisfactorily answer the question. However, if a question asks that you compare and contrast two historical events, and you simply describe the events, then you have not provided a complete answer to the question. Usually, answers to essay questions only receive complete credit if they directly answer the question that was asked. Therefore, make sure you carefully read each question and understand what it is asking.

THE FOLLOWING WORDS ARE FREQUENTLY USED IN ESSAY EXAMINATIONS:

Analyze means to separate something into parts and then discuss the parts and their meanings.

Clarify means to make clear by giving examples or definitions.

Classify means to arrange by groups based on shared characteristics.

Compare and contrast means to discuss similarities and differences.

Criticize means to pass judgment on something.

Define means to offer a definition which separates the object from similar objects.

Describe means to explain or detail the characteristics of something.

Discuss means to consider an issue or event from various points of view.

Evaluate means to give an opinion regarding the value of something.

Explain means to make clear or interpret information.

Illustrate means to use a picture, diagram, chart, or concrete example to clarify a point.

Interpret means to make plain or explain the meaning of something.

Justify means to give evidence in support of your position.

Prove means to establish the validity of something by presenting factual information or logical reasons.

Relate means to demonstrate the connections among people, events, ideas, or things.

Review means to reanalyze something and comment or explain it.

Summarize means to retell briefly the main points of something.

Support means to give strong evidence in favor of something.

Trace means to give the development, sequence, or progress of something.

Sources:

“How to Take an Essay Exam.” UMKC Writing Lab.

Rosen, Leonard, and Laurence Behrens. The Allyn & Bacon Handbook. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1994.

Troyka, Lynn. Simon and Schuster Handbook for Writers. Englewood, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1993.