Essay Exams

Essay exams can be intimidating. This handout is designed for students to prepare for and take an exam with confidence and with minimal anxiety. Prepare for the essay exam as you would any other exam that tests your knowledge. Do all of the reading assignments and review all the lecture notes. Then start asking questions about the exam and its contents. Taking an essay exam can be a great way to show your knowledge about a topic.

Preparation

Good Questions to Ask in Advance
- How many essay questions will be on the test?
- How much time should I devote to one essay question?
- How long or short should the essay be?
- How much emphasis is placed on grammar and correctness?
- What sorts of topics, concepts, facts, theories, and/or events are likely to be tested on the exam?
- What will need to be explained, described, compared, identified, or evaluated?
- What types of support or details are needed to develop the content of the essay?

The key point to remember is that the more questions you ask yourself and the instructor before the exam, the more prepared you will be.

Practice Explaining Before the Test
Most people often know more before the test than they realize. One way to determine how ready you are for a test is by having a conversation about the test material. If your instructor gives you a study guide, find a friend or family member and see how much you can explain to him/her about each point. Talking about the concepts prior to the test can organize your thought process and help you retain information for the exam.

Practice Writing Before the Test
Once you feel you have answers to your questions and have spoken aloud about the concepts, practice writing before the test date. Think of potential questions for the essay and try to answer them beforehand. Time yourself so that you don’t spend too much time on one particular essay or question and so you become accustomed to writing with a time constraint. Practice writing answers to several essay questions as many times as possible before the exam date.
The Exam Itself

Once you get into the classroom and have the test in hand, follow these strategies to lower test anxiety and to maximize your test performance.

- **Read** all the instructor’s directions carefully. Refer back to them periodically, or highlight them for quick reference. Even a well thought-out answer will not make the grade if you veer from the question. Be sure to ask questions if you do not understand the instructions.

- Before writing anything, **read over the entire test** to see if you have been given a choice of questions to answer or if you have to answer them all. You can then gauge the amount of information and time you will need to complete the exam.

- Carefully read each question you choose to answer, **identifying the words that predict what kind of answer you should give.** These clue words are usually verbs: *discuss, analyze, compare, explain, trace, define.* Next, note the significant nouns. For example, in the prompt, “Discuss the main features of bipolar disorder,” you should address all the pertinent features of bipolar disorder to effectively answer the question.

- **If a test question has more than one part, make sure you answer each part.** Many professors say that failing to answer all parts of a question is a common cause of low grades. To remember to answer all parts, check off each one as you answer it.

- Before you begin writing, **take a moment to briefly jot down** the points you want to include and in what order you want to present these points. You may want to create an informal outline, including, if possible, brief notes about the details to be used to support each point. Writing points down will help you remember them once you are deep into answering the question. Preplanning what you will write will keep you on track and lead to a better essay exam.

- Depending on your instructor’s preference, you may want to begin your answer with a portion—or a restatement—of the question. At the very least, **state the direction of your essay answer** (or the main point or thesis) within the first paragraph.

- Remember, even when professors indicate they don’t grade on mechanics and spelling, answers that are free of errors will always make a better impression than answers that are carelessly written. **Reserve a few minutes for final review.** Check language, spelling, supporting details, and strength of evidence. It is acceptable to make neat corrections on your paper.

- Even the best written answer will **not receive points** if the instructor cannot read the handwriting. **Be neat.**
Identifying Key Words in Essay Test Questions

A common problem in answering essay questions is not recognizing what the questions ask you to do and then formulating your answer accordingly. If you do not address the questions as they are asked, your answers may not meet the professor’s expectations, and you will lose points. On the other hand, it is not necessary to put in extra facts and ideas in an attempt to impress the professor.

Each of the following words frequently found in essay questions implies a specific kind of answer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key word</th>
<th>What it asks for</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Analyze</td>
<td>Explain the parts of a concept or idea and tell why your discussion of them is relevant, significant, or meaningful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classify</td>
<td>Divide ideas or concepts into appropriate categories or groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compare/contrast</td>
<td>Show how two things are alike (compare) and/or are different (contrast).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluate</td>
<td>Review the positive and negative points about a topic and develop a conclusion about the value of those points.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Justify</td>
<td>Explain why a theory is valid or true.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarize</td>
<td>State the main points concisely without commenting on them.</td>
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Remember to demonstrate that you understand the whole picture; make connections between ideas and points you make. Each answer should have a specific focus to which your facts, details, examples, and concrete evidence relate. Back up your specific focus in each essay using notes from lectures and class discussions as well as assigned readings. Cite a source if necessary. If the question invites you to take a stand on an issue or give your opinion, appropriate support is crucial.

Emphasize your main points in separate paragraphs and show the connections between your points with transitions. Demonstrate to your instructor that you can discuss the material in a coherent, organized manner. In longer responses, sum up with a brief conclusion.

Relax. With adequate preparation, you can approach an essay exam with confidence.