

ESSAY EXAMS

Before the Exam:

Prepare thoroughly! This is the key to doing well on an essay exam – in order to write a good essay, you need to know what you’re writing about. Try to do as much work as you can out-side of class, so there will be less to do when you have a time limit. You may find the following techniques helpful in preparing for an essay exam:

Talk to the professor! Learn the format of the exam. Will you have a choice of essays? What is the professor looking for? How much time will you have?

Go over sample questions. Many professors will give sample questions, or some type of review sheet. Use it! It is the best way to anticipate what’s going to be on your test. If the professor doesn’t give you review questions, **write your own.**

Study in a group. Once you have a list of sample questions, answer them with a group of classmates. They can give you details that you probably would have forgotten. Choose your group wisely, though; you will want to work with people who have similar study habits.

During the Exam:

If you study well, then the hard work will be out of the way. The exam should be the easy part, especially if you remember the following guidelines:

Don’t Panic! If you have studied, you probably know the answer. But in order to write coherently, you must keep a clear head.

Read the question carefully. Be certain that you understand exactly what is being asked. Underline key words and phrases.

Plan your time. Allot time for each question based on the number of points it is worth. Make yourself stick to the time limits you have set for yourself.

Plan your answer before beginning to write. Start with a “mind dump” – generate a grocery list of all the ideas that relate to the question. Pick two or three of the best ideas and arrange them for the best effect, then figure out what details and illustrations you want to use to back up each point. About 10% of your total time should be spent planning.

Have an explicit thesis. You can often just rework the question. For example, if you are asked to explain the attitudes of the environmental philosophers towards the Enlightenment, you could begin your essay with the simple thesis: “The ideas of the Enlightenment have come under sharp attack from environmental philosophers.” This type of simple, purposeful sentence will focus the rest of the essay and help provide a coherent answer.

Check your time when you're halfway through your time limit to see that you are roughly halfway through your outline. If you're falling behind, quickly jot down what you had planned to say – either in outline form to one side, or within the essay, leaving space to elaborate.

Allow time at the end to write a conclusion and to quickly review and revise.

Use all of your time. Normally an exam is designed to last most, if not all, of a class period. If you finish very early, your answer might not be as complete as others.

Essay Exam Checklist

- **Bring bluebooks.** Bring one more than you think you'll need.
- **Bring extra** (sharpened) **pencils** and (working) **pens.**
- **Bring your "lucky" pen or pencil.** Just about everyone has one, and it will be surprisingly reassuring to have it there.
- **Bring a watch!** This is critical to planning your time well. Don't count on a working clock being in the room.

A Simple Five-Step Approach

- **Think about the question.** Generate a grocery list of relevant ideas – a mind dump.
- **Generate a clear thesis.** Turn your question into a declarative sentence, repeating key words. This can become your thesis.
- **Pick your two or three best ideas.** Take these from the grocery list and arrange them for effect.
- **Develop each point with details, illustrations, and reasons.** This is where you should spend most of your time.
- **Conclude** – bring your essay to an end.

How to Interpret an Essay Exam Question

Often, your exam question will tell you how to approach the answer. Most essay questions will contain words such as analyze, describe, discuss, or explain. Each word suggests a different way of answering the question. Here is a list of common "strategy terms" and ways to approach them:

- **Analyze.** The question is asking you to divide an event, idea, or theory into component elements, and examine each one in turn.
- **Compare/Contrast.** Asks you to look at either the similarities ("compare") or the differences ("contrast") between two ideas.
- **Define.** The professor is asking you for the essential traits of something. Be sure to differentiate it clearly from other, related ideas.
- **Describe.** Give details! The question calls for a clear, vivid picture of the topic.
- **Evaluate.** You need to give a supported judgment of the importance or significance of the topic.
- **Explain.** You need to make the topic as clear and understandable as possible. Use specific examples and references whenever possible.

- **Summarize.** The professor is looking for a concise and comprehensive treatment of the major ideas.

Source: *The St. Martin's Handbook*, 2nd edition, pp. 699-700.

Things to Avoid

- Don't use unsupported opinions, general ideas, or vague feelings.
- Don't skip answers. If you really don't know a specific answer, write what you *do* know. It's better than a blank, and in the process of writing, you may recall pertinent information.
- Don't use inflated language or unclear terms. Instead, be natural and sincere. It's easier to read as well as to write.
- Don't assume that the facts you provide speak for themselves. Show how they relate to the thesis.
- Don't admit on the exam that you don't know what you are talking about.
- Don't miss major points in favor of dwelling on smaller points. (Know what the major points are!)

Don't spend all of your time on one question just because you understand it really well.