

## 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. When faced with compare and contrast questions, students often expend great effort trying to prove that the items being compared are, in fact, very similar, if not identical. No matter how similar things are, it is their uniqueness that usually characterizes them. It is therefore very important to always clarify how things are different. Occasionally similarity is a major point to be proved—particularly when things that appear to be dissimilar are very identical in some crucial manner. Even when this is the case, however, it is still important to recognize the uniqueness of each item.
- **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.

Adapted from: *The St. Martin’s Handbook*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, pp. 699-700.

### Compare and Contrast

Questions when

### 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.

## **Three Ways to Fail an Essay Exam**

### **1. Don't answer the questions.**

- If an essay exam has three questions and you get so wrapped up in answering the first two that you never even begin the third, you could easily fail the exam. Even if you received 100% on your first two questions (a virtual impossibility), you would only have a D.
- Time management is crucial in an essay exam. Always bring a watch or small clock to an essay exam and keep within your time limits. These limits may be suggested by the professor after each question. If they are not, then you must quickly write down some time estimates. It is usually wise to plan as though you had five minutes less than you actually do. It helps take up the slack that often occurs at the end of an essay exam. As your mind fatigues, you may work a bit less efficiently at the end, on the last questions. If you begin to run out of time, finish your essay in outline or sketch form. Come back to it at the end if you have time.

### **2. Don't Answer the questions**

- If a question asks you to talk about ABC and you discuss XYZ, you run a serious risk of failing
- Careful analysis of the question before you start writing will prevent wasted or misguided effort

### **3. Don't answer the questions**

- Students often feel nervous about taking a stand; perhaps for fear that they will be wrong. So they take refuge in the I-can't-really-tell-I-see-both-sides position. Students do this because it feels stronger, less risky than taking a stand. The reader, however, experiences this as an inability to answer the question.
- Make your position clear. You can still have mixed feelings about things. Just make a clear statement about what conditions create one feeling and what conditions create another.