



Doing Well on Essay Exams

For students who are comfortable with their essay writing skills, the onset of final exams featuring essay questions or short answers usually brings a sense of consolidation to a year's work and offers an opportunity to display the knowledge and thinking skills developed over the course of the year. Some students, however, are not quite so comfortable with the thought of doing essay exams; if you are one of these students, you will want to consider some ways to prepare which can foster this feeling of comfort.

Doing well on essay style exams, as is the case for any exams at college, demands that you be well and thoroughly prepared with the concepts, ideas, and theories, and arguments of the course. It is vital that you understand the relationships between elements of the course as there is often an emphasis on the content of the discipline, the theoretical perspectives used to understand the course, and on the way knowledge is defined in the course. You need to be able to think analytically and critically and articulate your thoughts in written form.

Typically essay style exams have fewer questions than we see on multiple-choice exams, and often the few questions that are offered are related to each other quite closely, but worded and focused slightly differently. Sometimes the test calls for the student to answer all questions, but often you are required to make selections, say a or b or choose three of seven. Questions typically emphasize some analytical and critical process around themes of the course with reference to particular theories, ideas, concepts, readings, or lectures through special direction words such as compare, contrast, discuss etc.

The key focus here is on understanding the key issues, themes, and concepts of the course on a "big picture" level. This kind of understanding suggests an emphasis placed on the student understanding and demonstrating the ability to discuss the connections among the themes and issues of a course. As well, many courses offer students critical tools in the form of theoretical models which students are expected to be able to discuss and apply to course related situations. Thus, preparation needs to focus less on detail than on the broad themes, their interconnections, and on the application of critical tools to course content.

Effective writers of essay style exams also tend to emphasize the importance of gathering and constructing possible questions that would test the knowledge and skills learned in the course. You may want to look to course assignments for the kinds of questions to look for and for feedback on how to improve your answers. Past exams - used as possible models - and questions given on assignments or introduced in class as "something for you to think about" offer a good basis. A keen student may also construct some questions on the basis of his or her understanding of course themes and issues and critical tools. Answering these questions as self-tests may help you to "pull the course together". Study groups may also be very helpful in this regard because different members of the group often have a different way of thinking about concepts and come up with different questions to test the same course content

Once you have prepared, it will be important to develop a strategy for approaching the actual writing of the exam. In the exam, read over all of your choices and make selections early. Divide your time so that you know how many minutes you have per question and make a brief plan for each question before writing. Plan a little time to review. Begin with the easiest alternative to accumulate points quickly and to boost confidence.

- Read over the questions, make necessary choices, and plan time. Note the relative worth of questions so you can plan your time accordingly. A question worth 50% of the grade should probably take 50% of the allotted time. Decide which questions you want to do, if you have a choice. It is often advisable to begin with questions you can do readily. Do not worry about doing the questions in order unless the professor specifies otherwise. If you fall seriously behind your time plan during the test, leave adequate space for the question you are working on, and start answering the other questions. You will be more likely to get a passing grade if you answer all the required questions at least partially rather than trying to make one or two answers perfect.
- Re-read the questions, carefully noting what each question asks you to do. At this point your knowledge about organizing essays from key words like "compare and contrast" and "discuss" will be helpful in focusing you on what to say and how to organize it. Many students lose grades because they fail to answer the question; instead they ramble on about material that may be closely related to the question but not precisely what the question requires.
- Organize your thoughts before beginning to write with a brief outline, mind-map, or diagram. A well-organized answer will be better received than one with the same points but with a less coherent presentation.
- Write a brief introduction including your statement of thesis adapted from the question you are answering. Tell the reader how you will prove this. For example, if the question says, "Compare and contrast radical feminist and liberal feminist approaches to equality." then you might begin with "Liberal feminists and radical feminists differ in terms of their view on equality. This is clear when one considers the theoretical stance each group takes on the origins of inequalities between the sexes, and on the differing stances each takes on proposing solutions to this inequality..."
- Keep your point straightforward and clear. To do this, use clear transitions to link your points. As well, include some examples or references to authors of your course; a few can be memorized and a few paraphrased (and it is wise to consult with your professor about conventions for doing this). Examples demonstrate your grasp of the subject matter. References to specific and precise examples from readings and lectures support and illustrate your points.
- Sum up simply to reinforce the coherence of your answer and review the paper for obvious errors, legibility, labeling of questions, and for things you might want to change.
- When writing essay answers, favor a direct, concise, precise writing style. Do not waste time trying to compose a graceful lead paragraph as you might if you were writing an essay; get to the point quickly and directly. State what you intend to discuss and develop those ideas with well-chosen examples.

- Demonstrate that you can analyze and evaluate the subject matter; do not merely repeat information from readings and lectures. The essay exam is an exercise in thinking and expressing yourself, not in memorizing and parroting. In other words, don't just stop at defining your terms; demonstrate your ability to think and express yourself using these terms.
- For the sake of your reader, be sure to write legibly, even if you have to print, and write on every other line. If your writing is virtually indecipherable, you may lose credit simply because the grader cannot understand what you have written.
- Writing on every other line produces a less crowded appearance, and also allows you to add material to your original answers when you proofread them. If you use several exam booklets, be sure to number them before handing them in, for example, "1 of 3," "2 of 3," "3 of 3." Protect yourself in the event that one booklet becomes misplaced.

As you begin to study -- and especially as you begin to write -- PAY ATTENTION TO ACTION WORDS (see handout on Clue Words) and be sure to read the directions carefully. Many students lose points simply because their answers do not respond to the language of the questions. They may write about the subject matter mentioned in the question, but not in the precise manner that the question requires. Be sure that your response matches the requirements of the question. When you preview a test, circle or highlight clue words as reminders of what your answer should include and how it should be focused and structured. Do not try to memorize the list of clue words; simply note the subtle differences in meaning among these examination "action words."