

Tips for Essay Exam Questions

- 1. Understand why professors give essay exams.** The purpose of essay exams is to test whether you can synthesize ideas, make an argument, and/or prove a point. Professors use essay questions to get you to show you can draw connections and communicate your own understanding of a subject. There may not be a RIGHT answer... just lots of good ones. But YOU have to prove it.
- 2. STUDY.** Know the material, but also try to see connections and components. Can you see how different facts discussed in class influence each other? Can you apply theories to real world situations, or vice versa? Don't merely memorize material, and don't study for total recall of names, dates, facts and figures as you might for an objective test.
- 3. Learn main ideas, key terms, steps in an argument, stages in a process, etc.** Memorize at least some key phrases, definitions or short passages. These will give your answer a sense of authority.
- 4. Anticipate exam questions.** If, for example, you have studied both the fall of Greece and the fall of Rome since the last test, you can anticipate a question which asks you to compare and contrast these. Pay attention to any study guides or hints your professor gives you. What concepts or theories do they say you "need to understand"? Phrases like this one are a good tip-off that you will be asked to write an essay on a concept.
- 5. Eat breakfast.** Try not to nap right before the exam. Arrive early to get yourself settled. Bring extra pens or pencils. It's important that you are physically well and comfortable during any test.
- 6. Read each question carefully.** Be sure you understand *exactly* what's being asked. One of the most common mistakes students make in essay exams is misunderstanding the question. Look for hints!!!! Pay particular attention to verbs... are you being asked to *analyze, compare, prove, illustrate, apply*? Do you know what these words mean in this context? Very often, the way a question is worded will give you an idea how to respond.
- 7. THINK.** Based on the question, what do you know? Jot down ideas and decide on your answer. Try to come up with a general answer that you are confident about. (*"Yes, I'm sure that economic development could help cure tuberculosis, and I think I can prove it."*) Plan your essay around this confident answer and the facts from the course which helped you come up with that answer.
- 8. Budget your time and use all of it.** Example: for a 50-minute class, *plan for 5, write for 40, then edit/revise for 5*. Allow enough time at the end to go back and finish incomplete answers and to proofread your paper. When the time is up for one question, stop writing and begin the next one. On a six-question exam, for example, six incomplete answers will usually receive more credit than three complete ones, so try not to leave any questions completely unanswered.
- 9. PLAN.** Try to *narrow your answer* as much as possible. Don't try to cover everything. Remember that a general essay usually reads as a weaker voice. Keep it specific.
Instead of: September 11th was difficult for America and it changed everyone's lives in lots of ways.
Try this: September 11th created measurable economic and emotional difficulties for firefighters.
- 10. Make an outline before you start.** This helps you *and* the professor: You won't forget what you were going to say, so you won't freak out. The professor will be able to see how your brain works. And best of all, if you run out of time, you can draw an arrow to your outline and write a hasty note to your professor about what you planned to do with the essay.
- 11. Be *decisive and specific* with your plan.** Divide your answer up into parts; this is easier if you read the question carefully. Professors will often word the question so that it contains clues about how to organize your major points. To illustrate, let's say your professor asks you to write about what factors influenced your decision to attend WCU instead of other institutions. Here are two examples of outlines you could use to help structure your essay:

Example: Weak outline

- I. Intro
- II. Why I Like WCU
- III. How I Made Friends
- III. Academic Stuff
- IV. Conclusion

Useful outline

- I. [Answer to question and/or thesis]
- II. Positive aspects of WCU
 - A. financial (ex. Low tuition)
 - B. social (ex. Diversity, events)
- III. Negative aspects of other institutions
 - A. distance/location
 - B. financial (ex. Higher tuition)
- III. Conclusion

- 12. WRITE.** If possible, in your own words, **answer the “question”** in your first paragraph. Your very first sentence should sum up your main point. If you are writing a lengthy answer, summarize the key points you intend to make in an introductory paragraph.
- 13. Use specific examples to support your points.** Whenever possible, use *quotes*, numbers, names, locations, and dates. If you can’t remember a specific date or detail, be as specific as possible. It is better to write, “Toward the end of the 19th century” than to say, “in 1884” if you can’t remember whether the correct date is 1884 or 1894. The approximate time may be all that is necessary, but you may lose credit for an incorrect date.
Weak: Teddy Roosevelt was a very tough person, like when he went to Cuba.
Strong: In 1898, Teddy Roosevelt and his Rough Riders showed tremendous valor and stamina in their raid on San Juan Hill. At this raid, Roosevelt led the charge and single-handedly killed three grizzly bears.
- 14. Don’t use 1st or 2nd person unless you are explicitly asked to write about yourself.**
Weak sentence: I think that President Lincoln was really smart. You can tell based on his speeches.
Better sentence: We can see from his speeches that Lincoln was highly intelligent.
Even better sentence: Lincoln’s speeches and intelligence helped advance his career. For example, ...
- 15. Don’t worry about summarizing at the end.** Your central argument and ideas should be presented *early*, and you may not have time to write a fancy conclusion.
- 16. When in doubt, prove you read it.** If you don’t know the answer or can’t figure out what to argue, just write what you remember and relate your facts to the professor’s question.
- 10. If you have time remaining, reread the exam.** Make sure you have answered ALL parts of the question.

Common Words Used in Essay Exams

Compare – Examine qualities or characteristics in order to determine resemblances.

Contrast – Stress dissimilarities and differences of associated things.

Criticize – Express your judgment with respect to the correctness or merit of the factors under consideration.

Define – Write concise, clear, authoritative meanings, keeping in mind the class to which the item belongs, and whatever differentiated it from all other classes.

Discuss – Examine, analyze carefully, and present considerations pro and con regarding the problems or items.

Enumerate – A list or outline form of reply. Recount, one by one, in concise form, the points required.

Evaluate – Present a careful appraisal, stressing both advantages and limitations.

Illustrate – Present a figure, diagram or concrete example.

Interpret – Translate, exemplify or comment upon the subject, and usually, give your judgment or reaction.

Justify – Prove your thesis or show grounds for decision.

List – Present an itemized series or tabulation.

Outline – Give main points and essential supplementary materials in a systematic manner.

Prove – Establish something with certainty by citing evidence or by reasoning logically.

Relate – Emphasize connections and associations.

Review – Analyze and comment briefly in organized sequence upon the major points.

State – Express the high points in brief, clear form.

Summarize – Give in condensed form the main points or facts.

Trace – Give a description of progress, sequence or development from the point of origin.