

# Essay Exam Preparation

## ABOUT ESSAY QUESTIONS

**Long essay questions**, for the most part, are aimed at demonstrating your ability to make valid generalizations and support them with sound evidence or to apply broad principles to a series of specific instances. The question will be directed toward some major "thought area." Essay questions are often and rightly called "think questions," or more formally, "discussion questions."

For example, in a literature course, you might be asked to contrast two authors' implicit opinions about the nature of man. In a history course you might be asked to discuss a leader's ideas on government as reflected in the influence he/she has on the country.



**Short essay questions** are more apt to be aimed at your ability to produce and present accurate explanations backed up by fact. A sample short question in a literature course may be, "In a well-organized paragraph explain Poe's theory of poetry." In a history course you might be asked to list the major provisions of a treaty and briefly explain the significance of each one.

Many professors announce in advance the general areas the test will cover, the concepts, issues, controversies, theories, rival interpretations, etc. Reviewing your lecture notes will also reveal broad areas which have been central to class discussion and therefore likely to appear on the test.

## PREPARING FOR AN ESSAY TEST

Preparation for an essay test, as for any test, requires close and careful review, and possible rereading of textbooks and class notes. The emphasis in this kind of exam is on "thought areas." But, where do you start?

### Step one - Anticipation

Anticipate questions that are likely to be on the test. Use previous tests and your class notes as your basic source material for the following three steps:

- Ask yourself, "What are the CONCEPTS and RELATIONSHIPS involved in the material you are reviewing?" Review your notes, OMITTING DETAIL, for the time being. Review major headings and chapter summaries in your textbook(s).
- Boil down your material to a tight outline form.
- Fit the necessary details into the concepts.

### Step two - Condensation

Organize all of your material into its principal groups. Identify the major concepts, the main subordinate concepts under each, and the critical details. Now, summarize the material in your own words and you have a condensed overview of it that will help you respond to specific conceptual (essay) questions.

### Step three - Practice

Some students profit by making up sample questions and then practicing answers. If you have a standard textbook, try two or three large questions. You may find it more to your liking to practice outlining answers to such practice questions.

It must be mentioned that mastery of a course's special vocabulary is essential groundwork. You will frequently be required to manipulate terminology. Getting this done is like tying your shoes before running a foot race. Failure to do it will most likely weaken your performance.

## STRATEGIES FOR TAKING AN ESSAY TEST

### The Preliminaries

- **Read the Directions -Carefully**  
Notice whether you must answer all essay questions or whether you can choose which ones to answer.
- **Read Every Question Before Beginning - Clarify Any Unclear Questions.**  
Select those questions for which you are best prepared and begin with the easiest one.



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- **Jot Alongside Each Question**  
Quickly (in about five minutes) note a few key words and phrases alongside each question. List technical terms and names that come quickly to mind, especially for answers that are right on tip of your tongue. This will keep them available later when pressures and anxiety may otherwise block them off.
- **Calculate and Budget Time for Each Question**  
Budget time according to point values for the question. Questions worth more points should be given more time.
- **The "Easy Questions"**  
Answer first the question you are certain you can answer. This develops an answering attitude and helps you feel more at ease. (Leave plenty of space for answering any questions you may have skipped for the moment.) After each answer leave enough space to add any further ideas that may come to mind as the exam proceeds.
- **The "Hard Ones"**  
Do not hesitate too long on a difficult question even if your answer is unsatisfactory. Inaction may block your thinking. Forcing yourself to write increases your chances of recalling the answer. "Free association," or freely jotting down on a piece of scrap paper words that come to mind as you think about the answer may help you overcome locking and remind you of new ideas to be organized into your answer.

### The Content

- **Note Key Instruction Words in Questions**  
Know the difference between a comment, compare, contrast, evaluate, defend, demonstrate, identify, and so forth.
- **Make a Skeletal Outline Before Beginning to Write**  
It will save you time and stress by providing direction and helping you avoid repetition. In addition, if you don't have time to finish, you can refer to your outline and probably pick up some partial credit points.
- **Avoid a Flowery Introduction**  
Answer the question directly and forcefully in the first sentence. Begin each answer with one or more summary sentences and amplify these as much as time permits. Remember that it is better to write a few summary sentences in answer to each question than to write a great deal about some and not have enough time left for the others.
- **Expand Your First Sentence According to Your Skeletal Outline**  
Support the main ideas with facts, illustrations (examples), and reasons. Use the technical terms and references from textbooks and lectures.
- **Be Concise and to the Point**  
Think more and write less. Instructors are usually impressed by brevity, conciseness, and accuracy. "Slinging the Bull" may go unnoticed on occasion, but not consistently.
- **Always Write Something**  
If you do not know the answer to a question, try to reason it out. You may still get some partial credit.
- **Summarize and Conclude**  
The introduction will be the "thesis" or the main point to be made. The summary is simply a paraphrasing of the introduction.
- **Reread**  
Check your answers and correct any errors in spelling, grammar, sentence structure or penmanship. Be sure you haven't left out any words, or parts of answers.