**Essay exam study skills in college and university**

You may often be asked in college to take essay exams. In certain ways, the same principles for writing good out-of-class essays apply to writing good in-class essays as well.

For example, both out-of-class and -in-class essays are more successful when you:

* take into consideration your purpose, audience and information;
* develop a thesis with support;
* when you prove your assertions with evidence;
* when you guide your readers with transitions.

However, there are some differences to keep in mind as you prepare to write. **The most important difference is the purpose for writing.**

Usually you write a research paper to learn more about your selected topic; however, you write essay exams to demonstrate your knowledge. You are not only conveying information, but also proving to your audience–the examiner–that you have mastered the information and can work with it.

In other words, **your purpose is both informative and persuasive.**Keeping this purpose in mind will help you both prepare for and write the essay.

**Preparing for the Exam**

* **Study connections between ideas.**  
  Your instructor is not looking for a collection of unrelated pieces of information. Rather, he or she wants to see that you understand the whole picture, i.e., how the generalizations or concepts create the framework for the specific facts, and how the examples or details fill in the gaps.

So, when you’re studying, try to think about how the information fits together.

* **Prepare practice questions.**  
  Try to prepare for questions that are likely to be asked. If your instructor has given you the questions themselves or a study sheet in advance, practice answering those questions. Otherwise, try to anticipate questions your instructor is likely to ask and practice those.

At the very least, outline how you would answer the test questions; however, it’s better to actually write out the answers. That way, you will know where you need to study more.

**Taking the Exam**

Again, while you’re taking the exam, remember that it’s not simply what you say or how much you say, but **how** you say it that’s important. **You want to show your instructor that you have mastered the material.**

* **Plan your time.**  
  Although you will be working under pressure, take a few minutes to plan your time. Determine how many minutes you can devote to each answer.  
  You will want to devote most of your time to the questions that are worth the most points, perhaps answering those questions first. On the other hand, you might want to answer first the questions that you are best prepared for.
* **Read the questions thoroughly.**  
  Take a few minutes before writing your essay to read the question carefully in order to determine exactly what you are being asked to do. Most essay exam questions, or “prompts,” are carefully worded and contain specific instructions about **what** you are to write about as well as**how** you should organize your answer.

The prompt may use one or more of the following terms. If you see one of these terms, try to organize your essay to respond to the question or questions indicated.

* + **classify:** Into what general category/categories does this idea belong?
  + **compare:** What are the similarities among these ideas? What are the differences?
  + **contrast:** What are the differences between these ideas?
  + **critique:** What are the strengths and weaknesses of this idea?
  + **define:** What does this word or phrase mean?
  + **describe:** What are the important characteristics or features of this idea?
  + **evaluate:** What are the arguments for and against this idea? Which arguments are stronger?
  + **explain:** Why is this the case?
  + **identify:** What is this idea? What is its name?
  + **interpret:** What does this idea mean? Why is it important?
  + **justify:** Why is this correct? Why is this true?
  + **outline:** What are the main points and essential details?
  + **summarize**: Briefly, what are the important ideas?
  + **trace:** What is the sequence of ideas or order of events?
* **Plan your answer.**  
  Jot down the main points you intend to make as you think through your answer. Then, you can use your list to help you stick to the topic. In an exam situation, it’s easy to forget points if you don’t write them down.
* **Write out your essay, using good writing techniques.**  
  As was said earlier, essay exams are like other essays, so use the same good writing strategies you use for other kinds of writing. Keep in mind that your purpose is to persuade your reader–the examiner–that you know the material.

**First, create a thesis for your essay that you can defend.** Often, you can turn the questions stated or implied on the exam into an answer and use it as your thesis. This sentence also functions as an introduction.

* + For example, suppose you are given the following **prompt** in your psychology class: *Define “procedural knowledge” and describe its relationship to the results of studies of amnesic patients.*
  + The **implied question** is: *What is “procedural knowledge” and how is it related to the results of studies of amnesic patients?*
  + Note how you can **turn the answer to that implied question into the thesi**s of your exam essay. This paragraph might serve as your introduction: *“Procedural knowledge” is knowing how to perform a task, such as tying a shoe or driving a car, and studies of amnesia have shown that this type of knowledge or memory is often retained by amnesic patients. Even in anmesic patients who have lost most of their declarative memory capacity, the ability to form new procedural memories is often intact…*
* **Then, proceed immediately to** **explain, develop, and support your thesis,**drawing upon materials from text(s), lectures, and class discussions.Be sure to support any and all generalizations with concrete evidence, relevant facts, and specific details that will convince your reader that your thesis is valid.  
  Make your main points stand out by writing distinct paragraphs, and indicate the relationship between them with transitions.
  + For example, in response to this **prompt** from a social work class,*Identify and give an example of four alternative solutions available in cases of family conflict.* a student wrote the following paragraph. Note the transition phrase and the generalization supported by specific evidence.. *. . The fourth alternative open in cases of family conflict is violence, and this is not an uncommon response. 25% of all homicides in the U.S. involve one family member killing another; half of these are spouse homicides. Violence usually takes one of two forms: explosive or coercive. Explosive violence is not premeditated. When the son takes and crashes the family car, for instance, the father may explode and beat him. Coercive violence, on the other hand, is pointed and intentional; it has the goal of producing compliance or obedience. Thus, a blow delivered with a threat not to repeat certain behaviors would be coercive. . . .*
* **Finally, sum up your argument with a brief conclusion** that lends your essay a clear sense of closure.

**Finishing the Exam**

* **Proofread your answer.**  
  Reserve a few minutes after completing your essay to proofread it carefully.

First, make sure you stick to the question. Always answer exactly the question asked without digressing. If you find you have digressed, neatly cross out the words or paragraphs. It’s better to cross out a paragraph that is irrelevant (and to replace it with a relevant one if you have time) than to allow it to stand. In this context at least, quality is always preferable to quantity.

Also check sentence structure, spelling and punctuation.

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