

Success Tip: Taking Essay Exams

An essay exam requires you to choose main ideas and major details from a large body of material and then form an organized response. Here are several things to keep in mind.

Prior to the exam...

Review your syllabus and/or ask the professor, how many and what type of questions will be on the exam? How many points for each question? Does the exam cover a specific chapter/unit or is it cumulative?

Professors will look for complete understanding of the entire question, rather than a portion.

A well-organized response will use relevant course material that supports answers. Responses should be clearly written and grammatically correct.

Types of essay test questions.

Some questions will require a short definition or identification of a term/person/concept. Some questions may involve long responses that will compare, contrast, critique, evaluate, synthesize, or apply the material.

Terms used in essay exams:

Compare. Examine qualities or characteristics. “Compare with” – emphasize similarities, though it may ask for differences as well.

Contrast. Stress differences, dissimilarities, or unlikeness of things.

Criticize. Express your judgment of correctness or merit. Discuss limitations and contributions of the concept in questions.

Define. Definitions call for concise, clear, authoritative meaning. Details are not required, but limitations of the definition should be briefly cited. Keep in mind the category to which an object belongs and whatever differentiates the particular object from all others in the category.

Describe (explain). Recount, characterize, sketch, or relate information in a narrative form. It is necessary to clarify, explain, and interpret the material presented. It is best to state the “how/why” to reconcile differences in opinion or experimental results, and, when possible, state causes. The aim is to make clear the conditions that result in what is being examined.

Discuss. Examine, analyze, and present considerations of pros and cons regarding the problems or items involved. This type of question calls for a complete and detailed answer.

Diagram. Present a drawing, chart, or graphic representation. Be sure to label the parts and provide a brief description.

Enumerate (list). Recount, one by one, in concise form, each point required. Expect to present an itemized series or tabulation.

Evaluate. Carefully appraise the problem and emphasize both advantages and limitations. Implies authoritative and, to a lesser degree, personal appraisal of the contributions and limitations.

Illustrate. Explain or clarify the answer to the problem by presenting a figure, picture, diagram, or concrete example.

Interpret. Expect to translate, exemplify, solve, or comment upon the subject and give your judgment or reaction to the problem.

Justify (prove). Show grounds for decisions. Evidence should be presented in a convincing form. This type of question demands confirmation or verification. Establish something with certainty by evaluating and citing experimental evidence by logical reasoning. *This is not an opinion question.*

Outline. An organized description that uses the main points and essential supplementary materials, omitting minor details, and presents the information in a systematic arrangement.

Review. A review specifies a critical examination. Analyze and comment briefly upon the major points of the problem in an organized sequence.

State. Specify, give, or present the high points in a brief, clear, narrative form. Details, examples, or illustrations are usually omitted.

Summarize. Give a condensed form of the main points or facts. All details, illustrations, and elaborations are omitted.

Trace. Give a description of progress, historical sequence, or development from the point of origin. Such narratives may call for an inquiry or deduction.

Other suggestions for success:

Relax and breathe. Read the directions twice to understand how many questions you are required to answer, and in what order. Read through the entire test to plan your time wisely and answer questions worth the most points first. Break the questions down into manageable parts and then translate into your own words to determine what is being asked. Recheck the question and your answer to make sure you answered all parts.

Prepare in advance.

Predict possible test questions from notes, text, and study guides. Practice writing out answers in advance, with a time limit if applicable, to properly prepare for essay exams.

Make an outline.

- Take time to think about the answer.
- Organize the answer before you begin writing.
- Start with a simple thesis statement that reflects understanding of the whole question.
- Systematically support the thesis.
- Be logical and make no assumptions.

Be neat.

- Proofread for clarity and basic grammatical correctness.
- Avoid generics such as *it, things, they, and stuff like that*.
- Use key terms related to the material.
- Write legibly. If professors cannot easily read answers, students lose points.