

Essay Exam Strategies

Presented by
the Center for Teaching and Learning



Why Do Teachers Use Essay Exams?

- To have students:
 - Demonstrate critical and analytical thinking skills
 - Articulate what they have learned

Types of Essay Exams

- In-Class
- Take-Home

In-Class: Receive Questions Ahead of Time

- Make outlines for each possible question
 - Include terms that will trigger thoughts
- Select a quote or two for each question
- Arrange a study group

In-Class – Don't Receive Questions Ahead of Time

- Focus study on main topics and things the instructor has repeated or focused on
- Find general issues that run throughout the class
- Look for themes in each piece or section
- Brainstorm possible questions and prepare outlines for those

During the Exam

- Set a time schedule.
 - Figure out how much time you have for each question. Bring a watch to keep yourself on track. Consider weighted questions.
- Select questions and make brief outlines for each. Always think before you write!
- Proofread what you've written before turning in your test.

How to Reduce Exam Anxiety

- Sit in the front of the class to reduce distraction
- Work on easier questions first to build confidence
- Focus on the process of answering the question, rather than the end result

Take-Home Essay Exams

1. Don't wait until the last minute
2. Analyze:
 - A. Identify
 - B. Explain
 - C. Compare
 - D. Argue
 - E. Assess

Take-Home (cont.)

3. Outline your essay
4. Find quotes – Watch length, make relevant
5. Come to the CTL for help
6. Check writing – Is it academic?
7. Proofread

Sample Question 1

- What effects has television had on American politics since the presidential election of 1960? What are some of the attempts that have been made to regulate television coverage of political campaigns? What further regulations could you suggest?

Sample Question 2

- In the "Improving Memory" segment of our course, we considered a series of memory strategies, including "chunking" and "organization". Describe these strategies and discuss the different ways in which they can be applied to learning different kinds of information. Is one superior to the other? Why? Why not?

Sample Question 3

- Outline the research done by Bahrick and Hall, 1991 and discuss its implications for the study of memory.

Other General Tips

- Qualify when in doubt
 - It is better to say "toward the end of the 19th century" than to say "in 1894" when you can't remember, whether it's 1884 or 1894 .
- Do an "Information Dump" immediately
- Use transitions for clarity
- Remember, you can cross things out but make sure everything can still be read

Common Essay Terms

- **Analyze:** Divide an event, idea, or theory into its component parts and examine each one in turn.
- **Compare and/or Contrast:** Demonstrate the similarities or differences between two or more events or topics. Be careful that each part of the essay deals with the same points.
- **Define:** Identify and state the essential traits or characteristics of something.

More Common Essay Terms

- **Describe:** Tell about an event, person, or process in detail, creating a clear and vivid image of it.
- **Evaluate:** Assess the value or significance of the topic.
- **Explain:** Make the topic as clear and understandable as possible by offering reasons, examples, and so on.
- **Summarize:** State the major points concisely and comprehensively.

Works Cited

- Pauk, Walter. *How to Study in College*. 5th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993.
- Landsberger, Joe. "The Essay Exam." *Study Guides and Strategies*. 15 Aug. 2005. 28 Sept. 2005 <<http://www.studygs.net/tsttak4.htm>>.