



How to Take an Essay Exam

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1. Know the course and resource materials. No answer can be good enough to cover up what you do not know. **Review** notes and old tests. **Predict** and practice essay answers.
2. At exam time, **overview** the entire set of questions; **weigh** or **value** questions; **select** the questions on which you will write.
3. **Budget** your time according to the weight or value you have put on the questions. Allow for both brief and fully developed answers. Allow for a preliminary rough outline and a final editing of each answer.
4. Plan your answer before you write it. Have a thesis or topic sentence clearly in mind. Outline on the back of your exam paper any ideas you want to include. Make your paragraphs follow acceptable composition forms: topic sentence, supporting details, concluding statement. Use good grammar, spelling and punctuation.
5. If possible, study sample exam answers before you take a test.
6. Most important, **know what the “task words” mean and what it is that they ask you to do**. Never attempt an essay answer without first identifying the task. If you miss the request, your answer will miss the point.

Learn The Meanings Of These Essay Exam “Task” Or “Cue” Words:

COMPARE—Tell how things, ideas, events, problems or qualities are similar. Sometimes this also means to mention differences. Be alert to how your teacher usually uses this word.

CONTRAST—Tell how things, ideas, events, problems or qualities are different from each other.

COMPARE/CONTRAST—Tell both the similarities and differences.

CRITICIZE—Give your decision about the truth or value of information or ideas. Support what you say. Opinion is not enough. Give both the good and the bad points before making your conclusion.

ENUMERATE (LIST)—Itemize the points in the answer in short, clear statements or single words. The answer can also be in outline form.

EVALUATE—Carefully appraise the problem, citing both advantages and limitations. Emphasize the beliefs and attitudes of authorities and, to a lesser degree, your personal evaluation.

EXPLAIN—Tell 1) how or why a thing happened, 2) how to do something, or 3) what something means in plain words of your own.

DEFINE—give the general meaning of a term; then, add special meanings that make the term different from all other ideas or things under the general meaning.

DESCRIBE—Put a mental picture into words so that the reader can see the events, people, processes, scenery or whatever the question asks.

DIAGRAM—give a drawing, chart, plan or graphic answer. Usually, you should label a diagram. In some cases, add a brief explanation or description.

DISCUSS—Write carefully about an issue or problem to fully cover every detail. Show cause/effect, relationships, pro and con reasons, or solutions to problems.



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IDENTIFY—See EVALUATE (LIST).

ILLUSTRATE—Use a figure, picture, diagram or concrete example to explain or clarify a problem.

INTERPRET—Translate, give examples of, solve or comment on a subject, usually giving your judgment about it.

JUSTIFY—Prove or give reasons for decisions or conclusions, taking pains to be convincing.

LIST—See IDENTIFY, EVALUATE.

OUTLINE—Organize a description under main points and subpoints. Omit minor details and stress the arrangement or classification.

PROVE—Establish that something is true by citing factual evidence or giving clear logical reasons. See JUSTIFY.

RECOUNT—Give details in the order that they happened. This can be done by listing or by writing in paragraph form as the exam requires.

RELATE—Show how things are related to or connected with each other, or how one causes another, correlates with another, or is like another.

REVIEW—Examine a subject critically, analyzing and commenting on the important statements to be made about it. See EVALUATE or CRITICIZE.

STATE—See TRACE.

SUMMARIZE—Give the main points or facts in condensed form, like the summary of a chapter. Omit details and illustrations.

TRACE—In narrative (story or report) form, describe progress, development or historical events from some point of origin. Do not simply list. Show cause/effect or other relationships between the points in the sequence. In historical sequences, show the “why” of a slice of history.