

Essay Exams

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What this handout is about

At some time in your undergraduate career, you're going to have to write an essay exam. This thought can inspire a fair amount of fear: we struggle enough with essays when they aren't timed events based on unknown questions. The goal of this handout is to give you some easy and effective strategies that will help you take control of the situation and do your best.

Why do instructors give essay exams?

Essay exams are a useful tool for finding out if you can sort through a large body of information, figure out what is important, and explain why it is important. Essay exams challenge you to come up with key course ideas and put them in your own words and to use the interpretive or analytical skills you've practiced in the course.

Instructors want to see whether:

- You understand concepts that provide the basis for the course
- You can use those concepts to interpret specific materials
- You can make connections, see relationships, draw comparisons and contrasts
- You can synthesize diverse information in support of an original assertion
- You can justify your own evaluations based on appropriate criteria
- You can argue your own opinions with convincing evidence
- You can think critically and analytically about a subject

What essay questions require

Exam questions can reach pretty far into the course materials, so you cannot hope to do well on them if you do not keep up with the readings and assignments from the beginning of the course. The most successful essay exam takers are prepared for anything reasonable, and they probably have some intelligent guesses about the content of the exam before they take it. How can you be a prepared exam taker? Try some of the following suggestions during the semester:

- **Do the reading** as the syllabus dictates; keeping up with the reading while the related concepts are being discussed in class saves you double the effort later.
- **Go to lectures** (and put away your phone, the newspaper, and that crossword puzzle!).
- **Take careful notes** that you'll understand months later. If this is not your strong suit or the conventions for a particular discipline are different from what you are used to, ask your TA or the Learning Center for advice.
- **Participate in your discussion sections;** this will help you absorb the material better so you don't have to study as hard.
- **Organize small study groups** with classmates to explore and review course materials throughout the semester. Others will catch things you might miss even when paying attention. This is not cheating. As long as what you write on the essay is your own work, formulating ideas and sharing notes is okay. In fact, it is a big part of the learning process.
- As an exam approaches, **find out what you can about the form it will take.** This will help you forecast the questions that will be on the exam, and prepare for them.

These suggestions will save you lots of time and misery later. Remember that you can't cram weeks of information into a single day or night of study. So why put yourself in that position?

Now let's focus on studying for the exam. You'll notice the following suggestions are all based on organizing your study materials into manageable chunks of related material. If you have a

plan of attack, you'll feel more confident and your answers will be more clear.

- **Don't just memorize aimlessly;** clarify the important issues of the course and use these issues to focus your understanding of specific facts and particular readings.
- Try to **organize and prioritize the information into a thematic pattern.** Look at what you've studied and find a way to put things into related groups. Find the fundamental ideas that have been emphasized throughout the course and organize your notes into broad categories. Think about how different categories relate to each other.
- **Find out what you don't know, but need to know,** by making up test questions and trying to answer them. Studying in groups helps as well.

Taking the exam

Read the exam carefully

- If you are given the entire exam at once and can determine your approach on your own, read the entire exam before you get started.
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- Look at how many points each part earns you, and find hints for how long your answers should be.
- Figure out how much time you have and how best to use it. Write down the actual clock time that you expect to take in each section, and stick to it. This will help you avoid spending all your time on only one section. One strategy is to divide the available time according to percentage worth of the question. You don't want to spend half of your time on something that is only worth one tenth of the total points.
- As you read, make tentative choices of the questions you will answer (if you have a choice). Don't just answer the first essay question you encounter. Instead, read through all of the options. Jot down really brief ideas for each question before deciding.
- Remember that the easiest-looking question is not always as easy as it looks. Focus your attention on questions for which you can explain your answer most thoroughly, rather than

settle on questions where you know the answer but can't say why.

Analyze the questions

- Decide what you are being asked to do. If you skim the question to find the main "topic" and then rush to grasp any related ideas you can recall, you may become flustered, lose concentration, and even go blank. Try looking closely at what the question is directing you to do, and try to understand the sort of writing that will be required.
- Focus on what you **do** know about the question, not on what you **don't**.
- Look at the active verbs in the assignment—they tell you what you should be doing. We've included some of these below, with some suggestions on what they might mean. (For help with this sort of detective work, see the Writing Center handout titled Reading Assignments.)

Key terms

Information words ask you to demonstrate what you know about the subject, such as *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *how*, and *why*.

- **define** —give the subject's meaning (according to someone or something). Sometimes you have to give more than one view on the subject's meaning.
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- **explain why/how** —give reasons why or examples of how something happened.
- **illustrate** —give descriptive examples of the subject and show how each is connected with the subject.
- **summarize** —briefly cover the important ideas you learned about the subject.
- **trace** —outline how something has changed or developed from an earlier time to its current form.
- **research** —gather material from outside sources about the subject, often with the implication or requirement that you will analyze what you've found.

Relation words ask you to demonstrate how things are connected.

- **compare** —show how two or more things are similar (and, sometimes, different).
- **contrast** —show how two or more things are dissimilar.
- **apply** —use details that you've been given to demonstrate how an idea, theory, or concept works in a particular situation.
- **cause** —show how one event or series of events made something else happen.
- **relate** —show or describe the connections between things.

Interpretation words ask you to defend ideas of your own about the subject. Don't see these words as requesting opinion alone (unless the assignment specifically says so), but as requiring opinion that is supported by concrete evidence. Remember examples, principles, definitions, or concepts from class or research and use them in your interpretation.

- **prove, justify** —give reasons or examples to demonstrate how or why something is the truth.
- **evaluate, respond, assess** —state your opinion of the subject as good, bad, or some combination of the two, with examples and reasons (you may want to compare your subject to something else).
- **support** —give reasons or evidence for something you believe (be sure to state clearly what it is that you believe).
- **synthesize** —put two or more things together that haven't been put together before; don't just summarize one and then the other, and say that they are similar or different—you must provide a reason for putting them together (as opposed to compare and contrast—see above).

- **analyze** —look closely at the components of something to figure out how it works, what it might mean, or why it is important.
- **argue** —take a side and defend it (with proof) against the other side.

Plan your answers

- Think about your time again. How much planning time you should take depends on how much time you have for each question and how many points each question is worth.
- For short-answer definitions and identifications, just take a few seconds. Skip over any you don't recognize fairly quickly, and come back to them when another question jogs your memory.
- For answers that require a paragraph or two, jot down several important ideas or specific examples that help to focus your thoughts.
- For longer answers, you will need to develop a much more definite strategy of organization. You only have time for one draft, so allow a reasonable amount of time—as much as a quarter of the time you've allotted for the question—for making notes, determining a thesis, and developing an outline.
- For questions with several parts (different requests or directions, a sequence of questions), make a list of the parts so that you do not miss or minimize one part. One way to be sure you answer them all is to number them in the question and in your outline.
- You may have to try two or three outlines or clusters before you hit on a workable plan. But be realistic—you want a plan you can develop within the limited time allotted for your answer. Your outline will have to be selective—not everything you know, but what you know that you can state clearly and keep to the point in the time available.
- Again, focus on what you do know about the question, not on what you don't.

Writing your answers

As with planning, your strategy for writing depends on the length of your answer:

- For short identifications and definitions, it is usually best to start with a general identifying statement and then move on to describe specific applications or explanations. Two sentences will almost always suffice, but make sure they are complete sentences. Find out whether the instructor wants definition alone, or definition and significance. Why is the identification term or object important?
- For longer answers, begin by stating your forecasting statement or thesis clearly and explicitly. Strive for focus, simplicity, and clarity. In stating your point and developing your answers, you may want to use important course vocabulary words from the question. For example, if the question is, "How does wisteria function as a representation of memory in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom*?" you may want to use the words *wisteria*, *representation*, *memory*, and *Faulkner*) in your thesis statement and answer. Use these important words or concepts throughout the answer.

- If you have devised a promising outline for your answer, then you will be able to forecast your overall plan and its subpoints in your opening sentence. Forecasting always impresses readers and has the very practical advantage of making your answer easier to read. Also, if you don't finish writing, it tells your reader what you would have said if you had finished (and may get you partial points).
- You might want to use briefer paragraphs than you ordinarily do and signal clear relations between paragraphs with transition phrases or sentences.
- As you move ahead with the writing, you may think of new subpoints or ideas to include in the essay. Stop briefly to make a note of these on your original outline. If they are most appropriately inserted in a section you've already written, write them neatly in the margin, at the top of the page, or on the last page, with arrows or marks to alert the reader to where they fit in your answer. Be as neat and clear as possible.
- Don't pad your answer with irrelevancies and repetitions just to fill up space. Within the time available, write a comprehensive, specific answer.
- Watch the clock carefully to ensure that you do not spend too much time on one answer. You must be realistic about the time constraints of an essay exam. If you write one dazzling answer on an exam with three equally-weighted required questions, you earn only 33 points—not enough to pass at most colleges. This may seem unfair, but keep in mind that instructors plan exams to be reasonably comprehensive. They want you to write about the course materials in two or three or more ways, not just one way. Hint: if you finish a half-hour essay in 10 minutes, you may need to develop some of your ideas more fully.
- If you run out of time when you are writing an answer, jot down the remaining main ideas from your outline, just to show that you know the material and with more time could have continued your exposition.
- Double-space to leave room for additions, and strike through errors or changes with one straight line (avoid erasing or scribbling over). Keep things as clean as possible. You never know what will earn you partial credit.
- Write legibly and proofread. Remember that your instructor will likely be reading a large pile of exams. The more difficult they are to read, the more exasperated the instructor might become. Your instructor also cannot give you credit for what they cannot understand. A few minutes of careful proofreading can improve your grade.

Perhaps the most important thing to keep in mind in writing essay exams is that you have a limited amount of time and space in which to get across the knowledge you have acquired and your ability to use it. Essay exams are not the place to be subtle or vague. It's okay to have an obvious structure, even the five-paragraph essay format you may have been taught in high school. Introduce your main idea, have several paragraphs of support—each with a single point defended by specific examples, and conclude with a restatement of your main point and its significance.

Some physiological tips

Just think—we expect athletes to practice constantly and use everything in their abilities and situations in order to achieve success. Yet, somehow many students are convinced that one day’s worth of studying, no sleep, and some well-placed compliments (“Gee, Dr. So-and-so, I really enjoyed your last lecture”) are good preparation for a test. Essay exams are like any other testing situation in life: you’ll do best if you are prepared for what is expected of you, have practiced doing it before, and have arrived in the best shape to do it.

You may not want to believe this, but it’s true: a good night’s sleep and a relaxed mind and body can do as much or more for you as any last-minute cram session. Colleges abound with tales of woe about students who slept through exams because they stayed up all night, wrote an essay on the wrong topic, forgot everything they studied, or freaked out in the exam and hyperventilated. If you are rested, breathing normally, and have brought along some healthy, energy-boosting snacks that you can eat or drink quietly, you are in a much better position to do a good job on the test. You aren’t going to write a good essay on something you figured out at 4 a.m. that morning. If you prepare yourself well throughout the semester, you don’t risk your whole grade on an overloaded, undernourished brain.

If for some reason you get yourself into this situation, take a minute every once in a while during the test to breathe deeply, stretch, and clear your brain. You need to be especially aware of the likelihood of errors, so check your essays thoroughly before you hand them in to make sure they answer the right questions and don’t have big oversights or mistakes (like saying “Hitler” when you really mean “Churchill”).

If you tend to go blank during exams, try studying in the same classroom in which the test will be given. Some research suggests that people attach ideas to their surroundings, so it might jog your memory to see the same things you were looking at while you studied.

Try good luck charms. Bring in something you associate with success or the support of your loved ones, and use it as a psychological boost.

Take all of the time you’ve been allotted. Reread, rework, and rethink your answers if you have extra time at the end, rather than giving up and handing the exam in the minute you’ve written your last sentence. Use every advantage you are given.

Remember that instructors do not want to see you trip up—they want to see you do well. With this in mind, try to relax and just do the best you can. The more you panic, the more mistakes you are liable to make. Put the test in perspective: will you die from a poor performance? Will you lose all of your friends? Will your entire future be destroyed? Remember: it’s just a test.

Works consulted

We consulted these works while writing the original version of this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout’s topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on this topic. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For

guidance on formatting citations, please see the [UNC Libraries citation tutorial](#).

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