

Basic Rules for Taking an Essay Exam

Essay exams require students to sift through large amounts of information, identify important concepts, and explain why they are important. They provide the opportunity for you to identify important concepts and put them in your own words, apply your knowledge, and come to conclusions about what you have studied.

1. **Preparing for an Essay Exam.** Start preparing from the first day of class to avoid cramming, which is stressful and ineffective. The material can be learned better by studying it over a long period of time. Repetition and reinforcement help you to store information in your memory. Preparing for a test can be broken into a number of areas for which you should study. These areas include:

- Lecture notes - take notes in class and transcribe them into a readable form very soon after class.
- Notes on the readings - Read all assigned material before the class it is assigned for and take notes.
- Relate the lecture notes to the readings - by examining the relationship between the lecture notes and the readings, you can better determine what concepts are important and likely to appear on the exam.
- Prepare a sample exam - Make a list of the topics that your professor spent a lot of time lecturing on, especially if they also appeared in the textbooks. These topics will most certainly appear on your exam in some form. Then, try to create essay questions that the professor might ask.
- Look up the answers to your exam questions - memorize the details necessary to support those answers.

2. **Approaching an Essay Exam.** There is more to an exam than sitting down and writing everything you know before you forget it. Following these simple steps will make you a better test taker.

- Read the entire test before you pick up a pencil or pen - By quickly reading the test first, you get an overview of the test. It is difficult to use one's time efficiently without that overview.
- Underline important words, and note where there is a choice of questions - This is what you should be doing while you are doing your overview. By taking notes and underlining important words in the directions or questions, you will be less likely to make mistakes.
- Plan your answer – identify the main concepts that you will use to answer this question. Also identify details - facts and statistics - that support your ideas.
- Outline your answers on scrap paper - This tactic is especially helpful if you “blank” from panic as you are running out of time to complete the test. By making a quick outline of your answers, you have at least something to write down for each question. Often the reassurance that the answer is there jogs your memory enough that you are able to calm down and supplement your outline and write a good answer.
- Plan your time according to how much each question is worth - One of the biggest problems students have (other than failing to prepare correctly) is running out of time. Plan a time budget and stick to it. You can always go back to a question that is giving you problems after you answer all the ones you do know. By spending too much time on a difficult question early in the test, you could lose credit for questions that you knew the answers to.

Adapted from Kathleen Nulton Kemmerer, Pennsylvania State University



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