

THE ESSAY EXAM: WHAT TO EXPECT, HOW TO PREPARE, AND HOW TO TAKE

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The essay exam is one method of testing used at the college level. Sometimes it is a portion of a multiple choice test, identifications, or it can be the only section of the exam (particularly in higher level classes). Essay exams test what the student knows, not what he doesn't as with some other forms of tests such as multiple choice.

The exam also prepares one for life not only in college, but after college where passing ideas along in writing, sometimes quickly, is practiced.

The essay exam is an effective way for an instructor to test your mastery of information, your skill in analyzing and applying that information, your discipline in using a limited amount of time efficiently, and (this is also important) your ability to write clearly and concisely.

An essay exam compels you to demonstrate your understanding of the “big picture”— the larger historical context within which certain sequences of events develop.

WHAT TO EXPECT:

Think in the broader terms of history. The details are useful to understand this but what is the effect of the events of history to the subject of the essay.

HOW TO PREPARE:

Study with the essay requirement in mind. Review the overall thrust of the material; get the “big picture.” Be sure you understand the major points of lecture notes and reading.

If you get a study guide, review not only the questions, but look over any Identifications. Often these identifications will be pertinent to the essay portion. Often knowing the identification will be the best tool to know the information necessary for the entire exam.

If the instructor gives study questions during lectures or as handouts, review them.

Alone or with a friend, make up a few essay questions on the material. This forces you to think about what is really important in what you're studying.

HOW TO TAKE THE TEST:

1. When you get the test:
 - a. Read the instructions and questions carefully (points can be lost by not doing the right number of essays or identifications).
 - b. Be sure you fully understand the instructions and what the questions. *If you don't, ask!* (something clear in the instructor's mind might elude the class)
 - c. How many parts to the question are there? Answer them all! Some students get carried away on the first parts of an essay question and never get to the rest.

d. Note how much weight each question carries and allot a proportionate amount of time. What is the KEY TASK you are asked to do? — analyze, explain, trace, compare, etc.?

e. Underline these key words. Jot notes or ideas you might wish to use in the answer or help you decide which questions (if you have a choice) that you want to answer.

VERY IMPORTANT: Make an outline of major points you intend to cover (you don't need to turn this in); refer to it as you write; add to it as you get bright ideas while writing.

AS YOU WRITE:

Use a pen!! Answer the whole question and nothing but the question (and not the question you *wish* had been asked but wasn't).

Include concrete facts and information as specific illustration, but not so much that you get bogged down. *Remember, an essay exam usually test for the application of information not mere memory of the detail.* Don't just throw together a lot of miscellaneous facts and then stop.

This is generally referred to as a Five Paragraph Essay. Although it doesn't have to be five paragraphs as it could be slightly shorter or longer the format is still the same.

—Dissect the question and address each point, in the order they are asked.

—Compose an effective introductory paragraph. Write a snappy or provocative opening sentence. Use the preferably 3 minimum points raised in the introduction paragraph for the body of the essay. One of these could be the “why?” for two or pertinent points or ideas.

—Write in paragraphs; use active verbs; write complete sentences.

—Be specific and precise! Avoid vague, “windy” language.

—Write a conclusion; recapitulate your main points; point out again the overall significance of question and answer. Try to end with a “bang”!

PROOFREAD before handing in your test/essay(s).