

## **The Essay Examination: Writing Under Pressure**

**Purpose:** The essay exam is commonly regarded as the most significant and reliable of all tests. Essay exams require students to demonstrate knowledge far beyond the level of “spitting back memorized facts.” Although “fact tests” belong in certain situations and are important to certain academic disciplines, liberal arts areas that deal with concepts rely on the essay exam to discern whether or not students are capable of thinking critically and analytically.

**Problems:** Essay examinations often present difficulties for both students and their instructors. Poorly interpreted or organized essay exam answers are frustrating for instructors to grade and, as a result, students may receive poor grades. It helps to be aware of the expectations and proper answer structure required for an essay exam.

**Solutions:** Students who are usually successful on essay exams share the same two characteristics:

1. Consistent, high preparation and performance standards in the course all semester long.
2. An understanding of the essay exam expectations and options for answer structures.

### **Time Management – of critical importance!**

Maximize your studying, reading and writing skills by actively planning your time when taking the exam.

- Wear a watch, and place the watch on your desk where it can be easily checked as you write.
- After you give yourself a few minutes to read the whole exam, note which questions may be worth the most points.
- Remind yourself which questions require the longer answers as opposed to shorter answers.
- Note exactly how much time you have left.
- Subtract appropriate planning time (5-8 minutes?).
- Subtract final proofreading time (5 minutes?).
- Decide on exactly how many minutes you should allot to each essay question, based upon the question’s answer length and percentage of grade weight.
- Write the exact time you need to be finished with each question on the test.
- If you do not finish your essay answer within a few minutes of your predicted completion time, STOP! Go on to the next question. Partial credit is always preferable to no credit. Just leave space, hoping to find extra time elsewhere with which to finish the exam. If a “sacrifice” is to be made (no answer), it is best that it be on the essay with the lesser point value.

- Although you may certainly ask, never expect extra time beyond the test time to complete your exam. Part of the “test” of an essay exam is your ability to produce, not only answers of reasonable accuracy, but to produce these within the allotted time. Finishing within the assigned time reflects your preparation and your ability to think quickly.

### **TYPES OF ESSAY QUESTIONS:**

Teachers know that there are at least nine types of possible essay questions. They will choose the type of question based upon the nature of the concept(s) taught, its importance in the course, and general student critical thinking skills.

1. **DEFINE** or **IDENTIFY**: (Short essay) brief overview. Provide a concise definition and relate to your course work.
2. **RECALL DETAILS**: A straightforward summary of a specific source. Paraphrase. Do not interpret or evaluate.
3. **EXPLAIN IMPORTANCE/SIGNIFICANCE**: Usually the general interpretation of a literary work. Provide specific examples.
4. **APPLY CONCEPTS**: Students must apply a certain concept, theme, idea, or principle taught to a particular situation or literary work. Illustrate the concept with examples.
5. **QUOTATION COMMENT**: The quotation usually complements or challenges one of the basic concepts of the course. Your thesis is usually set up as a pro or con argument.
6. **COMPARE/CONTRAST**: This requires the student to see relationships between important activities, time periods, or works studied in their course. Clearly identified, accurate points of comparison are crucial.
7. **VARIOUS SOURCE SYNTHESSES**: A course with many readings might require students to pull together important thematic points or ideas from information taken from the readings.
8. **SUMMARIZE and EXPLAIN CAUSES, RESULTS**: Professors who teach courses that deal with trends, events, and actions expect students to know cause and effect. Students must state each cause and result(s) with supportive evidence from lectures or readings.
9. **CRITICIZE or EVALUATE**: Much more than a personal opinion! Provide a reasoned, well-documented judgment based on appropriate criteria. Students must recall, synthesize, and apply course criteria taught. Students must understand the basic judgment standards critical to the subject matter.

**Final Writing Tips:** Write complete sentences. Use a strong thesis and use discipline-specific terms. Be direct and focused. Use transitions to link ideas and parts of your discussion. Cross outs are expected, but do not deteriorate into messiness. Neatly add last minute information in the margins if needed. No time left? Submit your outline. Write legibly and proofread. Get to class on time for directions and/or handouts and remain working for the entire examination period. Ask important questions only after the teacher has completed the opening remarks, if any.