

Essay Exams

Essay exams require students to demonstrate knowledge of concepts - to discern your critical thinking and analytical capabilities. To succeed on essay exams you should maintain:

- Consistent preparation and performance standards all semester long in your course.
- An understanding of the essay exam expectations and options for structuring your answer.

If you know the final exam will be essay, ask these five questions:

1. Will there be long or short answer essay questions?
2. How many of each type of essay question will be on the exam?
3. Will I have a choice of questions?
4. What is the grade percentage weight of each question?
5. Is the exam comprehensive/cumulative, covering concepts and information from the whole semester, or does it focus on particular units of study?

General Study Approach: Most courses based on learned concepts are arranged by one of the following:

- Chronological (time) periods
- Themes or major ideas
- Stages of development or skill levels

Be Prepared: A quick study of the textbook's Table of Contents and/or a quick overview of the course's lectures and tests should help a student easily identify the course's concept pattern. The large topical areas (time periods, themes, and stages) are usually the targets for essay exam questions. To be as prepared as possible, the following steps are recommended:

1. **Develop thorough familiarity with the course materials** by keeping up with readings and attendance.
2. **Know how to read essay exam questions** and how to translate the questions into writing tasks.
 - a) **Verbs** tell us what to do. Circle the instructional verbs in each question.
 - b) **Identify question parts** that suggest how to arrange answer-responses. Underline the minor writing tasks in each question. Perhaps number them.

- c) **Reread** to be sure that you comprehend the totality of the question. Essay questions are often dense or packed with information. Never assume that you understand the question immediately.
3. **Be a good planner.** There is no need to begin writing immediately. Avoid panic.
- a) **Use your mapping skills** – scratch lists or bubble outlines – to organize your answer.
 - b) **Match** the answer plan to the question to ensure no part of the question has been ignored.
 - c) **All or one at a time?** Some students plan out the answers to all of the essay questions; others prefer to do one at a time.
 - d) The all-planner has the advantage of understanding the professor’s total intent; the partial-planner may have the advantage of better immediate concentration.
4. **Write a good essay.** Never forget that this examination is an essay, and the answer(s) should be organized.
- a) **A short, direct introduction followed by a thesis statement** should reflect the question.
 - b) **The various parts or “prompts” in the question can become the topic sentences** for each body paragraph, in the same order as in the thesis statement.
 - c) **Cite readings, lectures, projects, etc.** in the body of your paragraph as “proofs” for topic sentences.
 - d) **Develop each sentence** with appropriate writing mode(s) as needed: description, classification, compare/contrast, argument, narration, definition, illustration (giving an example).
 - e) **Include a short, meaningful conclusion or summary**, possibly evaluative or predictive, depending on the question.