

Preparing for an Essay Test

Guidelines:

1. If you are given a restricted time and place for the exam, arrive on time or early. Plan to spend most of the class time responding to the exam.

2. Though they sound similar, essay test responses and the essay assignments asked of you in many of your classes have both similarities and differences:

- In both cases written responses are required in reaction to a prompt or a question (as opposed to exams or assignments that allow you to select the best answer from a list of possibilities).

- **Common characteristics of essay assignments:**

1. A multi-paragraph response, ranging from a page to much more than a page in length
2. Development of one point or thesis using examples (specifics) to support the statements made.
3. Predictable format: introduction, body of supporting paragraphs, and conclusion.
4. Freedom at times for the writer to decide what the essay will be about

- **Essay exams** vary in length and style, depending on teacher, class, and purpose of the assignment:

1. The range of options in terms of response length on essay exams:
 - Short answer – a sentence or two to define or explain a term, event, or individual
 - Medium length – a paragraph allowing writer to focus on a concept or question asked and develop that idea with some examples, i.e. specifics
 - Developed essay length – an essay response, comparable in form, focus and development to essay assignments described above
2. A very limited choice on most essay exams:
 - In other words, if required to answer all the questions on an exam, you must comply or be graded accordingly.
 - Likewise, if you change the nature of the question or prompt, you might get no credit for the answer given.

3. Getting started: first read through and/or listen carefully to any directions given for an examination assignment.

- Do you have to answer all questions or only some of the questions?
- Is this a short answer essay test (two sentence or small paragraph) or a longer essay exam, with a multiple paragraph response needed for each question?
- Do you understand the question(s)?
- If your response does not focus on the question, the entire response could be flawed, even if it is well written.
- Note whether a question has multiple parts. Do you need to respond to each one?
- Which questions do you know the most about?

4. If you have choices among questions, quickly review the questions and select those you can best answer. Note the amount of time allowed for the exam and the number of essay responses required; plan your time accordingly. Allot a certain amount of time for each question.

5. Before developing a response, brainstorm quickly to gather the details that you want to use in the response. Jot down a few words, dates, names or phrases in the margin of your paper to unload the key points you want to include.

6. Begin your answer by responding directly to the question asked.

- Use the phrasing from the question to focus your response.
- Then add the details that relate directly to that question, using clear sentence level construction.
- If the question selected involves a comparison, be sure to give equal time to both subjects, and tie the examples to the point you are trying to make.
- If this is an in-class assessment, write neatly enough for your ideas to be read without effort.
- If completed out of class, type the response if possible.

7. **With a short answer response**, use paragraph strategies to guide you. Include a topic sentence that directly responds to the question, some focused examples or a clear explanation of your point, and a closing sentence.

8. **With a longer multi-paragraph response**, follow the guidelines for effective essay form:

- If time, begin by developing a brief outline to identify the key points to be covered in the essay. This should ensure an organized response and could save you time and frustration in the end. Remember a key concept in essay writing is that like ideas should be paragraphed together.
- An introduction paragraph should clearly respond to the prompt or the question asked and may include a brief overview of what the essay will cover.
- Supporting paragraphs each need to have their own purpose, with each developing the main point in a new way. All support paragraphs should include examples or developed explanations, including, perhaps, an application of concepts introduced.
- Closing paragraphs should emphasize the main point and perhaps include a brief summary and/or reflection statement.

9. If time, read through your exam, checking on clarity, omissions, and/ or the need for additional details.