

ANALYZING ESSAY EXAM QUESTIONS

Most essay questions have two kinds of terms: TASK terms that tell you what to do and CONTENT terms that define the professor's expectations for the essay's subject and the limits of the topic. You can prepare for essay exams by using the following list of verbs and creating your own questions, based on the course content and material (this is how teachers create questions!). For example, ask yourself, "What could the professor ask me to define?" Then plan how you would answer the question!

COMMON "TASK" TERMS

Analyze: Divide an event, idea, or theory into its component parts and examine each one in turn.

Compare and/or Contrast: Demonstrate the similarities or differences between two or more events or topics. Be careful that each part of the essay deals with the same points!

Define: Identify and state the essential traits or characteristics of something, differentiating it from other (perhaps similar) things.

Describe: Tell about an event, person, or process in detail, creating a clear and vivid image of it.

Evaluate: Assess the value or significance of the topic.

Explain: Make the topic as clear and understandable as possible by offering reasons, examples, and so on.

Summarize: State the major points concisely and comprehensively.

ONE-PART ESSAY QUESTIONS

TASK	CONTENT or TOPIC
Describe	the major effects of reconstruction.
Discuss	the function of the river in <u>Huckleberry Finn</u> .
Explain	the advantages of investing in government securities.
Define	the term "gender stereotype."
Compare	the stages of personality development in Piaget and Erikson.
Discuss	impressionism and expressionism in art.

Sometimes teachers don't explicitly state the strategy term in a question or use a vague term like "describe" when they actually mean something more specific like compare/contrast. Read the question carefully to see what is being implied. You should also think about how the material was discussed in class. In the final question above, for example, the professor actually contrasted impressionism and expressionism and used two artists as examples. You might want to do this in your essay, choosing several other artists.

MULTIPLE-PART ESSAY QUESTIONS

Sometimes professors ask complex questions that have several parts. Divide the question into its parts and number them: usually, you have just created a mini-outline for the essay. Be sure that the questions are in a logical order. Then determine the task and content for each of the questions. Be sure to AVOID SKIPPING parts of the question; professors often count off for this. The time you spend analyzing the question will pay off!

SAMPLE QUESTIONS:

What effects has television had on American politics since the presidential election of 1960? What are some of the attempts that have been made to regulate television coverage of political campaigns? What further regulations could you suggest?

*This question basically asks you to create three separate lists: first, of the effects; second, of the attempts at regulation; and third, of further regulations you think are appropriate.

Compare the use of participant and nonparticipant observation in sociological research.

*This question does not neatly spell out the parts of the essay, so you need to do it for yourself. Break the question down into a series of narrow, more specific questions:

What are the characteristics of participant and nonparticipant research?

How do they differ when they are used in sociological research?

In what situations is it appropriate to use each of these approaches?

Once you have analyzed the question and seen its parts, you have already begun to plan how to answer it.

Jot down notes before you begin writing, even if time is short, and **BE SURE YOU BEGIN YOUR ESSAY BY RESTATING AND ANSWERING THE QUESTION.** When the professor reads this first sentence or two, it creates a positive psychological impression that you “know the answer”!

This handout makes use of both Gregory Galica's *The Blue Book: A Student's Guide to Essay Exams* and Andrea Lunsford and Robert Connors' *The St. Martin's Handbook*, 3rd Edition.