

ESSAY EXAMS: IF YOU CAN'T AVOID THEM, ACE THEM!

For many students, the worst kind of test is the essay exam. If you know the material well, your job will be simpler. These practical strategies, however, can make your responses easier to write and more successful as well.

Study with Essay Questions in Mind:

Many students memorize facts and definitions but don't think about how they fit together. If you're studying American history, for example, you may memorize facts about each war—but what story do all these facts about WWII and Vietnam tell you? Do they represent different U.S. approaches to diplomacy and warfare? Different uses of tactics and technology? Try to see each fact you learn not as an isolated particle of information, but as part of a larger *system* of information. This will help you anticipate many kinds of essay questions and also help you to create connections among the facts you are studying. If your book has sample questions at the end of chapters, think through how you would answer them, or better yet, time yourself and write out the essay. Practice writing under pressure!

Learn Two Examples for Every Key Idea:

One factor that separates outstanding essay answers from adequate ones is the number of examples a student provides. So if you're studying "popular democracy," be sure you can list at least two examples—direct elections and open candidacy for positions, for example. Also, you should be able to explain *why* these examples are important.

Examine the Question Carefully for Clues to the "Expected Answer":

If the question says "Compare the Bennets and the Bingleys as examples of British families," you are expected to do two things: explain what the "typical family" is and then explain how each family conforms to this description and how they are different. The biggest rule for success on an essay exam is to *do exactly what the question asks you to do*. Especially in complex questions with several parts, it's a good idea to check each part off as you answer it.

Plan Your Answer:

It is well worth your time to jot down notes before you begin writing; this gets your initial impressions down so that you don't forget them. Then number the ideas or draw arrows to create a mini-outline. This ensures that you don't leave out ideas. This process actually helps to calm you down and warm up your brain—writing the actual essay will be easier after you have thought it through. If you run out of time, professors may sometimes give you partial credit for the outline.

Write Your Answer, Skipping Lines:

A good way to begin is by restating the question and answering it (a sort of thesis statement). Then use your outline to write your response—this prevents you from getting off the subject. As you look at each key idea from your outline, be sure to add the examples you learned earlier and follow them with an explanation of why they are important. Then, in your conclusion, sum up the points you've made.

Finally, Add Trail Markers to Help the Professor Read Your Response:

This is why you have skipped lines; you can now go back through the essay and add transitions such as, "First," "And then," etc. As you read your essay, you can also be sure you've explained your points clearly enough and write in above the line if necessary. Trail markers are very important: if a professor can read your essay quickly and see its organization, he/she will tend to give you a higher grade. No professor expects an essay response to be perfect, but you should edit carefully, looking especially at the

words that have been important in the course. Make sure you've put in periods, question marks, etc. It's also a good idea to check with the professor about abbreviations *before* the exam; some professors don't like to see "&" for "and," for example. **Good luck!**

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.