



Essay Exams: If You Can't Avoid Them, Ace Them

.Writing essays in class can frighten most of us if we aren't prepared. Combining that with the fact that they must be handwritten can be a recipe for disaster. However, there are ways to prepare yourself for the inevitable.

How to prepare:

- 1) Study with essay questions in mind. When you are trying to learn facts about your specific subject, *try to see those facts as part of a larger system of information*. This kind of thinking will allow you to talk about the facts as they relate to other facts and the 'big picture' of your essay subject matter.
- 2) Learn TWO examples for every key idea. If you are responding to an essay question that asks for examples, then the difference between an OK answer and a great one could be the *number of examples you provide*. But you should *make sure you can explain these examples* because explaining your reasoning is often a critical factor on many rubrics (critical thinking is key).
- 3) Examine questions carefully for clues. When teachers make essay questions, they often hint what you should include. The most important thing when taking an essay exam is to *do what the question asks you to do*. Going off topic is disastrous and will not earn you the grade you want; instead of panicking and trying to complete the essay quickly, take your time understanding what the question is asking for.
- 4) Plan your answer. Certain scenarios may limit your ability to outline effectively, sure. However, it is highly unlikely that 2 minutes will dictate your ability to finish (provided you studied for the exam in the first place). *Writing down notes or phrases* somewhere before you begin writing your essay will be beneficial in keeping your essay on topic, and it could strengthen anything you write if it includes examples. You can *number things, draw arrows...anything you find helpful to help structure your essay*. In the end, not doing this will cause you to have to erase a large sum of your writing, and you'll have to start over, which will cost you valuable time.
- 5) Skip lines when writing. Doing this will force you to *slow down to a reasonable pace*, and it will help you *keep an eye on your structure and content* as you write. Be sure to include an introduction (even if you only restate the question) and a conclusion (which should summarize your thesis AND provide and answer to "why does it matter?"). Be sure to include the examples you wrote down earlier into your body paragraphs.

Additionally, skipping lines will afford you the privilege of *fixing any mistakes* you made before you turn in your essay. If you forgot punctuations or transitions, the spacings will allow you to include them before you turn in your essay, which will increase your chances of a higher grade.

If you follow these tips, then you will feel much more confident in your writing, and you will likely earn a higher grade. And if you have any further questions regarding essay exams, schedule an appointment with the Writing Center! We're happy to help!