

Taking Essay Examinations

Preparing for an Essay Exam:

1. Take notes in class daily.
2. Read the material on schedule; highlight, but also take notes on a separate page (including page numbers of important material). The key to valuable notes is reading and listening thoughtfully, critically.
3. Review class notes and chapters (or notes) for several days before the test.
4. Set up a study group, if appropriate, and review any study guides.
5. Create and answer your own essay questions that cover major foci of the course, reorganizing the material and recombining areas covered in the course. Try writing your answers in a designated time: This process prepares you best for the actual experience of the examination.

Step 1 In Taking the Essay Exam: Reading and Thinking

1. Take a watch.
2. Calmly read the entire examination, judging those questions that are most accessible and estimating the time you should take for those questions you choose to answer.
3. If you are confused about the directions, ask your instructor to clarify.
4. Determine the time you have for each question.
5. Read each question you have chosen at least twice so that you can stick to the subject and answer exactly what the question demands.
6. Pay close attention to the verbs in each essay question. These verbs are the keys to your approach. You may be asked to *describe, summarize, define, explain, compare and contrast, analyze, interpret, or evaluate*. Each verb demands that you follow a certain writing pattern.
7. Decide how much time you have to answer each question and divide your time into the three parts of the process: prewriting, composing, and editing. (For a 20-minute essay, 5 minutes, 12 minutes, 3 minutes, respectively, would be typical.)

Step 2 In Taking the Essay Exam: Composing

1. Take several minutes to shape a thesis that responds to the requirements of the essay question. Be as clear as possible.
2. Outline your argument on scratch paper—keeping in mind what evidence you will present for your points.
3. Open the essay with the thesis statement and move quickly to the overview (menu statement or format) of your essay. Don't waste time.
4. Each paragraph of the essay should open with a topic sentence that reflects items in your overview. You must be sure to give detailed support for each general statement. Move quickly through the details you noted down and add more specific evidence, as you think of it.
5. Avoid padding your essay.
6. Remember the importance of completing each essay, so keep your eye on the time and get as much of your planned material as possible on paper.

Step 3 In Taking the Essay Exam: Editing

1. Never rewrite your essay unless directions demand that you do. *Just edit it.*
2. Use a few minutes to correct spelling or grammar errors, to clean up the essay.
3. If humanly possible, read with an eye to revise (not rewrite) for substantive changes: Strike out irrelevant passages and add points where they are clearly needed. You may wish to add a paragraph and note the addition by letter—"insert A."
4. Turn the essay examination in.

Recommended Source: *The Little, Brown Handbook*

Responding to the Essay Questions: Looking at the Requirements--from *The Little, Brown Handbook*

Sample Instructions:	Key Words:	Strategies for Answers:	Examples of Wrong Answers
Define dyslexia and compare and contrast it with two other learning disabilities.	define compare & contrast	Specify the meaning of dyslexia--distinctive characteristics-- Analyze similarities & differences (severity, causes, treatments)	Feelings of children with dyslexia Causes of dyslexia
Analyze the role of Horatio in <i>Hamlet</i>	analyze	Break Horatio's role into its elements (speeches, relations to other characters)	Plot summary of <i>Hamlet</i> Description of Horatio's personality
Explain the effects of Paxil	explain effects	Set forth the facts and theories objectively-- Analyze the consequences	Argument for or against Paxil Reasons for prescribing Paxil
Discuss term limits for elected officials	discuss	Explain and compare the main points of view on the issue	Analysis of one view Argument for or against one view
Summarize the process that resulted in the Grand Canyon	summarize	Distill the subject to its main points, elements, or steps	Detailed description of the Grand Canyon
How do you evaluate the Laffer curve as a predictor of economic growth?	evaluate	Provide your opinion of significance or value, supported with evidence	Explanation of the Laffer curve without evaluation-- Comparison of the Laffer curve & another predictor, without evaluation