

Writing Essay Exams

Plan Your Time

Always give yourself 5 minutes at the start of the exam to look over the test, read the instructions carefully, decide which question you are going to start answering first, and divide your time. If there are three questions of equal length to be answered in 60 minutes, allow yourself 14 minutes for each. When the time is up for one question, begin the next one. The remaining time, 12 to 15 minutes, is used to finish incomplete answers and edit your responses. It is important to remember that three incomplete answers usually receive more credit than one complete one.

Read Through Exam Questions Once

Answers will come to mind immediately for some questions (tip: answer those ones first). Write down key words, lists, or brief ideas now when they're fresh in mind. Otherwise these ideas may be blocked or unavailable when the time comes to write the later questions. This will reduce anxiety, which disrupts thoughts.

Outline the Answer Before Writing

A concise, complete and clear answer is preferred to a rambling attempt to write "everything you know." To know a little well is superior to knowing much and presenting it poorly. Use the key words you have written down to form an outline. The few minutes you spend on this will be worthwhile.

Begin Your Answer

Your first sentence should state what the entire essay is about and suggest how you intend to approach it. For example, if a question asks you to discuss the practical applications of Newton's three laws of motion, you might begin by writing: "There are many practical applications to Newton's laws of motion." Then you should proceed to name the three laws and their practical applications, devoting one paragraph to each law. If you have time, your final paragraph may be a summary or review of the major points you covered in the essay.

Make Your Main Points Easy to Find

Because many essay exam readers have a large number of papers to read in a short period of time, they tend to skim for key ideas rather than read everything; therefore, state each main point at the beginning of a new paragraph. For lengthy answers or multipart questions, you might use headings or the same numbering used in the question. Use spaces (two lines) to divide your answers into different parts.

Use Correct Paragraph Form

Be sure to write your answers in complete, correct sentences and to include only one major point in each paragraph. Each paragraph should have a main idea, usually expressed in one sentence. The remainder of the paragraph should explain, prove, or support the main idea you state. Try to use correct spelling and punctuation, but concentrate more on writing your ideas in clear, plain language.

Include Sufficient Explanation

A frequent criticism instructors make of student essay answers is the failure to explain fully or to support ideas. By using only one major idea per paragraph, you avoid this danger and force yourself to explain major points. If you think of answering an essay question as a process of convincing your instructor that you have learned the material, then you are likely to include enough explanation.

Qualify Answers When in Doubt

It is better to say "toward the end of the 20th century" than to say "in 1994" when you can't remember whether it's 1994 or 1984. In many cases, the approximate time is all that is wanted. When possible, avoid very definite statements.

Proofread Your Answers

Reread the essay question and then read your essay twice. In the first readthrough, check to see that you have included all necessary facts and information and that you have adequately explained each fact. Add anything you feel improves your answer. Then read the essay a second time, checking and correcting all the mechanical aspects of your writing. Check for hard-to-read words and errors in spelling, punctuation, and accuracy, especially of numbers.

If You Don't Know the Answer

Despite careful preparation, you may forget an answer. If this should happen, don't leave a blank page; write something. Attempt to answer the question—you may even hit upon some partially correct information. The main reason for writing something is to give the instructor a chance to give you a few points for trying. If you leave a blank page, your instructor has no choice but to give you zero points. Usually, when you lose full credit on one essay, you have automatically eliminated your chance to get a high passing grade.

If You Run Out of Time

Despite careful planning of exam time, you may run out of time before you finish writing one of the essays. If this happens, try to jot down the major ideas that you would discuss fully if you had time. Often, your instructor will give you partial credit for this type of response, especially if you mention that you ran out of time.

Make Your Answer Legible

It is to your advantage to make your paper as easy to read as possible. Poor handwriting and carelessly written answers interfere with the marker's understanding of your material and can become frustrating.

- Bring several pens and test that they work before the exam.
- Write answers on right hand pages of the exam booklet. Do rough work only on left hand pages.
- Number your pages and put your name on each sheet.
- Always double space.
- Leave plenty of space between questions. Leave a 1" margin at each side. The instructor will need space to write comments.