

Taking In-Class Essay Exams

About In-Class Essays

- Relax... Essay exams are really not so different from the essays you write as assignments, except for two major points: you can't get feedback from a peer or the instructor, and only rarely are you given the chance to do serious revision.
- The good news is that how you communicate what you know is rewarded more than mere memorization or repetition of details. To write a successful essay, you need to be able to recall relevant information and to organize it clearly, generating a thesis and building to a conclusion.

Preparation Before Exam Day

- Take good notes throughout the course. Start reviewing them several days before the exam, and look for connections between concepts. You may want to discuss these in your essay.
- If you don't know what the exam questions will be, create your own questions from your notes, and practice answering them with a time limitation.
- Look at essay exams you have written in the past. Think about what instructors have praised in your writing, and what instructors haven't liked so much.
- If you can use notes or books, make sure you know where to find important information and mark those places if allowed.

The Day of the Exam

- Believe it or not, what you wear and when you've eaten can be important factors in your success. Studies have shown that being too warm or too full can affect your performance in exam situations. Be sure you've eaten well, but not too close to the exam. And don't overdress—bring along a light jacket that you can take off or put on depending on your level of comfort.
- Spend 15 minutes writing before class, just to warm up and break through anxiety.

Taking the Exam

- Before the exam begins, budget your time: If your allotted time is 75 minutes, then prepare to spend 15 minutes planning, 50 minutes writing, and 10 minutes reviewing. Keep track of time as you write, and stick to your plan.
- When you receive the exam, read the question(s) carefully. Look for keywords, especially those telling you what to do. Keywords in the question will suggest how to structure your essay. (Several of these keywords are explained on the back of this handout.)
- After you decode your question, develop your thesis statement. The thesis statement should:
 - Narrow the topic you are writing about to a single idea;
 - Convey your purpose—what you are going to do—and your opinion;
 - Provide a preview of how you'll arrange your ideas.(On the back of this handout is a thesis statement checklist.)
- After you write your thesis statement, think of at least three strong ways to prove your thesis. Then put these ideas in a logical order. To do this, you'll use:
 - Topic sentences (telling your reader the focus of the paragraph);
 - Transitions (referring back to earlier sentences to link ideas or paragraphs).

- If time is going to run out before you finish writing, complete your essay with an outline of any remaining key points. This may not be an ideal solution, but at least it will show your instructor that you have more to say about the subject.
- If you do have time left when you finish, read over what you've written. Proofread and edit your essay to make it even more clear. (Below is a proofreading and editing checklist.)

Exam Question Keywords:

Analyze: Break a topic into its parts. Identify the parts and demonstrate how they relate to each other to make the whole.

Compare: Asks for detailed similarities and differences between two ideas.

Define: Tell what a concept/thing/event is and what it is not. Place it in a general class or group, and then explain how it is different from other members of that class or group.

Discuss/Examine: The most vague of directions, this asks you to find relationships between things, evaluate situations, interpret statements.

Evaluate/Assess: Make a judgment about something; this leaves room for you to present more than one view on a position.

Explain: Find a relationship between things, and explain how and why this relationship works.

Illustrate: Use details/examples to show relationships between things.

Interpret: Translate what something means or explain what an author means.

Outline/Trace/Review: Organize main and subordinate points to classify the elements or stages of development of a concept/thing/event.

Prove: Declare a point of view about a topic; then give reasons for believing it.

Thesis Statement Checklist:

Does it make an assertion (claim) about your topic?

Does it convey your purpose, opinion, and attitude?

Is it limited to only one strong idea?

Is it specific?

Does each paragraph of your essay have something to do with the thesis?

Proofreading and Editing Checklist:

If the essay is about a literary or scholarly text, have you named the author and work in your introductory paragraph?

If quotations have been used, have you explained why you're using them?

Do you provide strong, clear transitions?

Have you maintained consistent verb tense?

Is there variety in the length, structure, and rhythm of sentences within the essay?

Can you find any spelling errors or incorrect punctuation?

Can you find any sentence fragments or comma splices?