

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, try to create your own from your notes. Then, practice answering them with a time limitation.
- Review your past essays (including other essay exams if you have them). What comments (praise or problems) did your instructors give you?
- If you can use notes or books, make sure you know where to find important information and mark those places (if allowed).
- Wear a watch or make sure to have a good view of the class clock.

The day of the exam:

Make sure to eat a healthy meal a half-hour to hour before. Dress in layers (as in a light removable sweater)—it's easier to adjust to different temperatures.

Taking the exam:

- The biggest and most avoidable mistake made with in-class essay taking is poor time management. Budget your time. If you have a 75-minute exam—spend approximately 15 minutes free writing/planning/brainstorming, 50 minutes writing, and 10 minutes reviewing. Keep track of your time as you write and stick to your plan.
- Read your exam carefully. Pay attention to the question or topic—what are the keywords? Keywords in the question will suggest how to structure your essay and what you are to address throughout your paper. (Several example key words are on the back of this hand-out.)
- After you decode your question, develop your thesis statement. This statement should: narrow the topic you are writing about to a single idea, convey your purpose (what you are going to do/your opinion), provide a road map for essay (*see our "how to write a thesis statement" hand-out*).

- After coming up with your thesis statement, think of at least three strong ways to prove it. Then, put these three or more ideas (sub-claims that support your thesis statement) in a logical order. Provide topic sentences for your paragraphs. Make sure to provide evidence to your claims. And include some analysis after you present your evidence. This is extremely important because it shows you understand and have thought about your claims and evidence.
- With the last ten-fifteen minutes of the exam time, read over what you have written. Are your ideas well-developed? Have you fully answered the exam question? Proofread and edit your essay to make it clear and concise.
- If time is going to run out before you finish writing, complete your essay with an outline of any remaining key points. This is not ideal but it will show your instructor that you had more ideas to discuss, but you ran out of time.

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 explain how it is different from other members of that class or group.

Discuss/Examine: The vaguest 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. Be careful not to make unfounded judgment (one that is solely based on opinion).

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. Follow with reasons/justifications for that view.

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?

Does it answer a “how” and/or “why” question?

Is it specific? Does each paragraph of your essay connect to 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 introduced and explained why you're using them?

Do you provide strong, clear transitions (*see our transitions hand-out for more details*)?

Have you maintained consistent verb tense?

Can you find any spelling errors or incorrect punctuation?

Can you find any sentence fragments, run-ons, or comma splices (*see our grammar hand-outs for additional help with these types of mistakes*)?

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