

How to Prepare for Essay Exams

Essay exams test more than your knowledge. They also test to see if you can:

- Use critical thinking skills
- Write structured and cohesive responses
- Apply your knowledge of concepts, ideas, and theories
- Develop well supported arguments
- Discuss the relationships between ideas

To do well on an essay exam, you must be familiar with the course content, theoretical perspectives, and the way knowledge is defined in the course. You need to critically analyze this information and communicate it in written form.

In this handout, we'll go through the parts of preparing for essay exams: preparing before the exam, practicing structuring your responses, and managing the pressures of writing the exam.

Two Tips to Prepare Before the Exam

When preparing for any exam, study the way you will be assessed. Remember, the key focus of essay exams is on understanding the major issues, themes, and concepts of the course at a big-picture level. As a result, your preparation needs to focus less on detail and more on the broad themes, their interconnections, and on the application of critical tools to course content.

1. Study throughout the semester

Want to be successful on your exam? Study the relevant course material **throughout the semester**. Your studying may involve:

- Asking questions in office hours to clarify concepts
- Creating short summaries of your lecture notes
- Attending study groups to discuss the key lecture topics
- Completing practice problems

2. Focus on studying how you will be assessed

As you get closer to your exam date, study the way your professor will test you. Reflect upon the key course objectives and prepare for your exam by:

1. Creating a study guide based on the key course themes, issues and critical tools.
2. Looking at course assignments, lecture questions, and past exams to get an idea of what kinds of problems you might discuss.
3. Creating and answering essay questions to practice your understanding and communication skills.

Study tip: Short on study time? Create an essay outline for your responses

Create an essay outline for your responses to develop the general structure of your argument and how you will support your views. This will help you organize your thought process and identify the areas that you need to study more.

You can also use your outlines to create essay drafts. Identify the areas you need to further develop by fleshing out your ideas in more detail.

Five Strategies to Improve Your Essay Exam Responses

Studying the relevant information is great, but you also need to communicate your learning. Remember that your professors are looking for your critical analysis of key concepts from lectures. You need to successfully present your ideas within the exam's time limit.

Here are five strategies to improve your essay exam responses. We'll go through some examples of responses and how effective they are.

Sample Question

Based on Gamoran's article on ability groupings, create an argument for or against the academic/applied streaming system in the Ontario education system. Relate your argument to the teacher training programs and make recommendations on how teacher training can be supplemented to support all students.

1. Start answering the question right away

Don't waste your time restating information unless the instructions tell you to do so.

Example	Comments
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Gamoran's article discusses the inequity of ability groupings. Specifically, it argues that ability groupings lead to inequity. Based on this article, the academic/applied streaming system in the Ontario education system has negative impacts on students because...	The first two sentences are used to restate the question. When your professor is marking your work, they are aware of what the exam question was and want to see your thoughts on the prompt.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The academic/applied streaming system in the Ontario education system has negative impacts on students because...	In this example, the writer immediately states their argument and is going to explain their stance.

2. Clearly state your views

Example	Comments
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The academic/applied streaming system in the Ontario education system has negative impacts on students because it builds unhealthy relationships between students and teachers, reinforces negative perceptions of low performing students, and increases teacher burnout.	This is a clear thesis statement. The writer states their view and explains how they will support it. We expect that the writer will explain their arguments as given.

3. State your point, give your proof, and provide your analysis

Support your ideas by using examples. This can help to strengthen your arguments, but you still need to explain how this connects back to your point.

Example	Comments
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Streaming reinforces negative perceptions of low performing students. Students in the applied stream are less likely to graduate from high school ³ . This can suggest that these students are less competent than students in the academic stream, thus reinforcing a false perception of ability.	This example guides the readers by using the point-proof-analysis structure. This organization helps them follow your ideas and understand how you came up with your conclusions.

4. Use transitional phrases and sign-posting words to direct the readers through your ideas

These words can get your readers to pay attention to how your ideas flow together.

Example	Comments
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> First of all, ...	This phrase tells your readers that you are going to explain your first point.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Although high performing students perform better in homogenous groupings, low performing students do not.	“Although” signals contrast to your readers.

5. Keep your discussion focused

Explain how everything fits together throughout your response and in your conclusion.

Example	Comments
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> In applied classes, teachers spend most of the time on classroom management as opposed to instruction ⁸ . Teachers need to be aware of the challenges in applied classrooms and be trained in effective preventative classroom management strategies to engage students in meaningful learning goals.	When you give an observation, explain how it connects back to your thesis. The example uses this format: Observation from the text → Connection to the prompt Throughout your response and in your conclusion, reinforce your key ideas.

Study Tip: Answer the question, not what you think the question is

Pay attention to how the question is worded. The prompts used in essay exam questions affect how you are expected to organize your answer.

Five tips for writing your essay exam

You've studied the relevant material and you know how to communicate your learning in written form, but are you ready for the final exam? Exams are challenging because they force you to respond in a limited amount of time. You have to effectively manage your time and your nerves. Here are five tips for writing your essay exams.

1. Plan how you will use your time

One of the challenges with essay exams is that you have a limited amount of time. Plus, there are many stages involved in writing a strong response. You can overcome these barriers by budgeting your time for different tasks. For example, if your essay exam is 1 hour long, you can try this:

10 minutes: plan and brainstorm

5 minutes: organize your ideas and develop a focus

25 minutes: write

10 minutes: revise and polish

2. Re-read the questions before you answer them

Always make sure that you answer every part of the question that is given to you. Missing a part of the question can lead to an off-topic response. This can result in a reduction in marks.

3. Organize your thoughts by using a brief outline, mind maps, or diagrams

Planning your essay is an important part of the writing process. You may find it useful to decide what and how you will be writing by making some rough notes. You can also include these as part of your response to show your Professor.

4. Be legible

It helps the person marking to see what your ideas are and what you are trying to say. Consider skipping lines to help make your writing more legible. This will also help you when you are revising your work.

5. Write something

If you aren't sure what to do, try writing the body paragraphs first and your introduction last. You may develop a stronger sense of what your thesis is after you have developed your arguments. Remember to leave space so that you can add in your thoughts.

More resources for essay exams

Need more feedback on your exam preparation? Book an appointment with an Instructor:
<http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/appointments-undergraduate>.

Check out these resources to get more help and information on essay exam strategies:

Test and Exam Preparation – Queen's University

<http://sass.queensu.ca/exam-prep/>

Preparing for Tests and Exams – York University

<http://lss.info.yorku.ca/resources/preparing-for-tests-and-exams/>

Essay Exams – University of Guelph

<https://guides.lib.uoguelph.ca/WritingEssayExams>

Looking for more learning strategies? Visit us at: <http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/>.