

## Breaking Down Essay Exam Questions into Three Parts

Essay exam questions can be intimidating. However, you can identify each of their parts and apply your understanding of them in structuring a response.

Imagine you have to answer the following question:

"Outline the similarities and differences between sales management and marketing management. Decide which approach would work best for your small business and give a reason for your view."

Where should you start? There are a lot of words in this question and each of them affects how you should write your response. If you don't understand how these words fit together, your answer may be considered off topic.

Essay exam questions are made of three connected parts: the prompt, the topic, and the restrictions. In this handout, we'll break down a typical essay exam question into its three parts. You will be able to use this strategy on your essay exams.

### 1. Highlight the prompt

Prompts are the words or phrases that tell you how to answer the essay question. The prompt structures your response and what you must include in it. Check the meaning of the prompts if you are unsure of how they will affect your response.

"**Outline** the similarities and differences between sales management and marketing management. **Decide** which approach would work best for your small business and **give a reason** for your view."

Prompt	What you need to do
Outline	Give the main points only.
Decide	Which approach will work best for your small business?  Make your choice based on your previous answer. This is probably the heart of your answer.
Give reasons	Don't forget to explain your view: you must justify/explain why you chose the answer that you did (your approach).  This could be where you score the most marks.

## 2. Highlight the topics

The topics are the words that tell you what you must write about. Remember to respond based on the context of your course.

“Outline the **similarities and differences** between **sales management and marketing management**. Decide which approach would work best for your small business and give a reason for your view.”

Topics	What you need to do
<b>Similarities and differences</b>	Explain how sales management and marketing management are the same and how they are different.
<b>Sales management and marketing management</b>	This is the topic: this is what you need to write about in relation to your small business.

## 3. Identify the restrictions

Restrictions are the words in an essay exam question that narrow the focus of your response. You'll only get marks for the parts that meet the restrictions.

“Outline the similarities and differences between sales management and marketing management. Decide which approach would work best for **your small business** and give a reason for your view.”

Specifics	What you need to do
<b>Your small business</b>	This limits your answer to your small business, not business in general and not a medium or large business.

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### Exercise

Identify the 3 parts of the following essay exam question and create an essay outline for your response.

“This term we discussed at length Markovski’s work on the creation of social hierarchies within institutions. Summarize her main argument and evaluate it, illustrating its strengths and weaknesses by describing how it would work in the context of the modern university.”

### 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/>

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/>.