

The Norton Field Guide to Writing

Taking Essay Exams

Essay exams present writers with special challenges. You must write quickly to show your instructor what you know about a specific topic. This chapter offers advice on how to take essay exams.

Considering the Rhetorical Situation

Think about the message you want to articulate, the audience you want to reach, and the larger context you are writing in.

PURPOSE:	In an essay exam, your purpose is to show that you have mastered certain material, and that you can analyze it in an essay.
AUDIENCE:	Will your instructor be reading your exam, or a TA? What criteria will your audience use to evaluate your writing?
GENRE:	Does the essay question specify or suggest a certain genre? Look for key words such as <i>argue</i> , <i>evaluate</i> , or <i>explain</i> .
STANCE:	In an essay exam, your stance is usually unemotional, thoughtful, and critical.
MEDIA / DESIGN:	Since essay exams are usually handwritten on lined paper or in an exam booklet, legible handwriting is a must.

Analyzing Essay Questions

Essay questions usually include key verbs that specify the kind of writing you'll need to do—argue a position, two texts, and so on. Following are some of the most common kinds of writing you'll be asked to do on an essay exam.

- **ANALYZE:** Break an idea, theory, text, or event into its parts and examine them.
- **Apply:** Consider how an idea or concept might work out in practice.
- **ARGUE/prove/justify:** Offer reasons and evidence to support a position.
- **CLASSIFY:** Group something into categories.
- **COMPARE/CONTRAST:** Explore the similarities and/or differences between two or more things.
- **Critique:** Analyze and evaluate a text or argument, considering its strengths and weaknesses.
- **DEFINE:** Explain what a word or phrase means.
- **DESCRIBE:** Tell about the important characteristics or features of something.
- **Evaluate:** Determine something's significance or value.

- **Explain:** Provide reasons and examples to clarify an idea, argument, or event.
- **SUMMARIZE/review:** Give the major points of a text or idea.
- **Trace:** Explain a sequence of ideas or order of events.

Some Guidelines for Taking Essay Exams

Before the exam

- **Read** over your class notes and texts strategically, **ANNOTATING** them.
- **Collaborate** by forming a study group that meets throughout the term.
- **Review** key ideas, events, terms, and themes.
- **Ask** your instructor about the form the exam will take. Working with a study group, write questions you think your instructor might ask, and then answer the questions together.
- **Warm up** before the exam by **FREEWRTING** for ten minutes or so.

During the exam

- **Scan the questions** to determine how much each part of the test counts and how much time you should spend on it.
- **Read over** the entire test before answering any questions. Start with the question you feel most confident answering.
- **Don't panic.** Know how you first react to a testing situation.
- **Plan.** Allow yourself time to make some last-minute changes before you turn in the exam. You can use that time to fill in gaps or reconsider answers you feel unsure about.
- **Jot down the main ideas** you need to cover in answering the question, and number those ideas in order. Write the most important parts of your answers early on.
- **Turn the essay question into your introduction**, like this:

Question: How did the outcomes of World War II differ from those of World War I?

Introduction: The outcomes of World War II differed from those of World War I in three major ways: World War II affected more of the world and its people than World War I,...

- **State your thesis explicitly**, provide **REASONS** and **EVIDENCE**, and use **TRANSITIONS**. Restate your main point in your conclusion.
- **Go over your exam**, looking for ideas that need elaboration and for errors.

