



Ten Cardinal Rules for Taking Essay Exams

1. Read all the exam questions right away, and read them carefully, paying particular attention to the “directives”—the words that tell you what you’re supposed to do.
2. Answer only as many questions as you have to, and do exactly what the questions ask you to do.
3. Answer the questions you’re confident about first—save the trickier ones for later.
4. Plan your essay—don’t just start scribbling.
5. Somewhere early in the essay, answer the essay question in one sentence: this sentence will be your thesis.
6. Write clearly, plainly, and confidently—don’t use flashy style or experimental organization unless you’re sure that your teacher likes such things.
7. Dazzle the reader with specifics; the best essay exam answers are ones that both answer the question completely and provide a particular narrow focus for discussion.
8. Try to save time to proofread; if you run out of time and you’re still writing, finish with a brief outline of the points you would have made if you’d had time.
9. Try to write longer essays than the minimum required number of pages: don’t “pad” or “BS,” but do demonstrate your knowledge and brilliance as completely as you can.
10. Always write something, even if you think you’re probably off the mark: some credit is better than no credit.

Bonus Rules: Try to write legibly. Write on every other line. Try not to offend the teacher. Write a concluding sentence rather than a full-fledged concluding paragraph. Use obvious transitions. Keep it simple. Breathe.