

ESSAY EXAMS

Essay exams are fairly common while in college, and they are not as difficult as they appear!

Preparing Before the Exam

- **Look at the big picture ideas opposed to the minute details** of the information you have learned. If you've grasped the big picture, then you can create an essay. Often, professors are looking for your understanding of the generalizations, and concepts instead of specific dates, names, and facts.
- **Prepare practice questions.** Sometimes, professors will give students a list of questions that may be on the exam. In this case, determine three main ideas that will help you write a paper on the topic. If the professor does not provide you with a list of questions, come up with your own! Review your notes for the major concepts and formulate questions based off those. In both cases, it is best to write out actual essays for each question. However, if that is not feasible, then jotting down the main ideas of each question works as well.
- **Prepare for an essay exam just as you prepare for a multiple choice exam.** Understanding the material and memorizing is the best way to be successful on an essay exam.

Taking the Exam

- **Quality over Quantity.** It's not about how much you say, it's about how you say it.
- **Plan your time.** Although you are working under pressure, take a few minutes to plan out how much time you can spend on planning your essay, choosing a side, selecting the main ideas, writing the paper, and proof reading it at the end.
- **Carefully read the Questions.** Take some time to read the question and determine exactly what the question is asking. Most prompts are carefully worded and have specific information regarding what you should write about. Check out the following terms and practice identifying a response to certain questions.

Compare: what are the similarities between these ideas?

Contrast: what are the differences between these ideas?

Critique: what are the strengths and weaknesses of this idea?

Describe: what are the important characteristics or features related to this idea?

Evaluate: what are the arguments for and against this idea? Which side is stronger?

Interpret: what does this mean? Why is this important?

Justify: why is this correct? What makes this statement true?

Outline: what are the main points and essential details?

Summarize: briefly, what are the important ideas?

Trace: what is the order of events or sequence of ideas?

- **Plan your response.** Before you beginning writing, write down the main ideas you intend to write about. Utilizing this list will help you stay on track.
- **Use good writing techniques.** An essay exam is incredibly similar to writing a regular paper, and the same formalities apply. Don't forget to create a thesis statement, create at least three main body paragraphs, and continually relate evidence back to the thesis statement. For more information on planning a paper, see our Paper Writing worksheet.
- **Utilize the material you learned in class.** Incorporate the material that you studied into each essay question to show to your professor that you truly understand the concept.
- **Proof read your essay.** Make sure you leave time to proof read your essay. Make sure you have answered the question, double check your spelling and punctuation, and verify that your paper is clear.

Words to Avoid Using when Writing Papers

Try to avoid using the following words in your writing. Practice utilizing the alternatives in your writing.

- **You:** when using this word, it appears that the writer assumes everyone must feel this way. Try using one, the population, the people, anyone, or a person
- **Really:** this word does not add any important information. If you want to present an idea as important, try using absolutely, without a doubt, certainly, actually, or truly
- **I/ me/ my:** try to avoid using first person language. Again, use third person language such as one, the population, the people, anyone, or a person. Or, simply reword the phrase so it does not depend on person language.
- **Like:** use a stronger metaphor such as similarly, comparably, or relating
- **Things/ stuff:** both words are incredibly vague. Instead, use ideas, principles, topics, facts, matter, possessions, or thoughts.
- **A lot:** frequently, a great deal, an abundance, substantially, notably

Activity: In the space below, craft a short response to the following "essay" prompt- What are the best steps to take to succeed in answering an essay question on exams?