

## How to Take an Essay Examination<sup>1</sup>

Essay exams are not a matter of quantity but of quality. The race goes not to the swiftest writer but to the one who best organizes and presents what he or she knows. The problem facing the student who must take an essay test is simple: how can that quality be achieved?

### I. General Principles

#### a. **Organize around a clear focus.**

You must have some point of view to help you organize and select the facts you wish to include. Choose a focus that is limited enough to cover in the time allowed and that allows you to include all the material the teacher will expect to find. Write a thesis sentence that clearly states your focus or main point and that indicates the main sections of your answer. For most types of essay, the thesis sentence should state a conclusion, not merely announce the sections. For example, sentence A below merely announces the sections of the paper. It is certainly better than no thesis sentence at all, but in most cases it is not as helpful to your reader as a thesis that embodies your conclusion, as in B.

Q. Discuss the concept of love in D.H. Lawrence's novel *Women in Love*.

Thesis sentence A: This essay will discuss bisexual, homosexual, and familial love in Lawrence's *Women in Love*.

Thesis sentence B: An example of bisexual, homosexual, and familial love in *Women in Love* reveals the hatred and the isolation that are present even in the closest love relationships.

#### b. **Outline your answer.**

Do not begin writing your answer without first making an outline. Write down the three or four main points you want to make. They should all help to develop, explain, or prove your thesis sentence.

#### c. **Come right to the point.**

Don't waste time with a general introduction or any sort of beating around the bush. It is usually a good idea to state the main point (thesis) of your answer at the beginning.

#### d. **Stick to your subject.**

Everything you say should relate directly to the subject you have announced in your thesis sentence. Do not try to tell everything you know. Essay tests measure the excellence of your ability to select, organize, and analyze the details you have mastered.

#### e. **Be thorough within your limits.**

Make your answer complete. If a question asks about a subject discussed in class or in your reading, the teacher probably expects you to deal with all the main points made there. Often, the best responses also include original analysis. In addition, after you have written your outline, ask yourself, "Have I left out anything important to the defense of my thesis sentence?"

#### f. **Support generalities with specific and relevant evidence.**

Evidence is crucial. The teacher is testing your detailed knowledge of a body of material, not just your ability to make or repeat generalizations. Show that you know the specific information. Do not merely state *what* you believe; explain *why* you believe it.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted with permission from Barbara Walvoord. Helping Students Write Well. New York: MLA, 1982.

## II. Some common essay topics

### a. **“Discuss X” or “Describe X” or “Analyze X.”**

The challenge in such questions lies in the student’s ability to impose organization on a broad subject. First you must decide: How shall I divide X into sensible, manageable segments? Let us say the direction is “Discuss political elites.” The very phrasing seems to entice you to blurt out everything and anything you happen to recall about elites and their societies. Resist temptation. Take time to write an outline and make efforts to limit your approach to an angle of the problem that will most favorably display your knowledge and understanding.

Sometimes you can better deal with a discuss-or-analyze topic if you turn it into one or more questions. Answers to these questions will give you suggestions for a thesis sentence and an outline. For example:

1. *Direction:* The Reformation was caused by economic factors. Discuss.

*Ask yourself:* Was the Reformation caused solely by economic factors? Which noneconomic factors should I mention?

2. *Direction:* Analyze the theme of social class in nineteenth-century novels.

*Ask yourself:* What do the authors of nineteenth-century novels think about social class? What do the novels’ characters think? What social classes are illustrated in the novels?

### b. **Compare and contrast.**

If you are instructed to compare and/or contrast, you are still confronted with the basic problem of selecting a focus, organizing your facts, and indicating to the instructor what your approach will be. Don’t automatically give every fact you know about X and then every fact about Y. Instead, outline the major similarities and/or differences. Under each similarity or difference discuss both X and Y, making specific and concrete comparisons.

### c. **Identify or define.**

Follow two rules: (1) put each item into a major category, and (2) separate it from all other items in this category.

### d. **Agree or disagree.**

Usually it is possible to write an A exam whether you agree or disagree; the instructor is interested in whether you can marshal evidence to support your position. Often it helps to keep in mind the major arguments on the other side and try to refute them in your essay.

## III. Study hints

- a. In looking over your notes, try to see relationships between parts, comparisons, and contrasts. Try to guess what might be some typical questions and outline answers to them.
- b. Then study the outlines as well as your class notes.

## IV. The exam

- a. Read the directions thoroughly. In particular, see if a question has more than one part, and answer all parts.
- b. Outline your answer before you begin writing. The outlines you prepared in studying should help a great deal here.
- c. Bring a watch, if there is no clock, and budget your time.
- d. If you run out of time, outline main points and examples, and write “out of time” to tell your professor what happened.
- e. Proofread your answer, if possible, to catch careless errors.
- f. Write precisely what you mean. Always choose the most specific and accurate word.
- g. Make every word do a job. Don’t eliminate necessary examples and evidence, but do present them without wasted words.