

Studying For Essay Exams

Essay writing is a valuable skill in all academic disciplines, one that is often required in writing exams. Though it can be difficult to write an essay under the time constraint of an exam, there are techniques and tips that can help make the process more smooth and simple. Remember that different people find success in different ways, so try different strategies until you find what works for you.

Preparation strategies

Start studying well in advance of the exam, so that if you encounter any problems, you will have time to deal with them.

Talk to your professor. You are likely to be better received if you ask pre-planned, respectful questions about the essay exam without appearing to be digging for answers. Come prepared with your own ideas about concepts and talk to the professor about them.

Review lecture and text notes. These will provide you with a more detailed understanding of course material.

Consider previous essay topics and midterm formats, if available.

Be interactive in your studying. Talk with others about your ideas and invite them to share theirs. Retaining information will be easier if it is discussed within a broad range of opinions. It will also help you to address different critical perspectives in an essay.

Try coming up with your own essay questions from the material you study.

Refer to your course outlines and themes to try to predict essay questions. In order to write persuasively, you must have a solid understanding of the material from which you are to make your argument.

Prepare outlines for potential essay topics.

If you are worried about freezing up when it comes time to write the essay, try practicing at home under a time constraint. You should be able to write an essay in an hour or less.

Typically, you do not need to worry about memorizing quotations. Instead, focus on understanding the material and being able to articulate that understanding. If you memorize a few quotes in the process, that's great!

Writing the essay

If the essay is part of a larger test or exam, make sure you give yourself enough time to complete it.

Read the essay question carefully, paying close attention to the assignment verbs. Make sure you craft your essay according to the guidelines set by the question (see list of assignment verbs below).

Know what process works best for you. Try writing a brief outline that you can refer back to if you get stuck. If you try this and decide that you prefer to get straight to writing, that's fine too.

The foundation of your essay is your thesis statement. If you get writer's block, think about your thesis and what led you to the statement it makes. If you've made an outline, refer back to it. Sometimes pause is necessary to gather your thoughts.

As you write your essay, don't treat it like a term paper. You will not be expected to have the same depth and precision in an essay exam as would be expected in a hand-in essay.

Don't edit and proofread as you write because you may develop unrealistic expectations and run out of time. Don't let second-guessing undermine your confidence.

Write neatly and double-space. Your professors can't mark what they can't read!

When you finish your essay, look it over for grammatical and spelling errors. If there is anything you feel compelled to add, use the lines left blank from double-spacing.

Important terms

Define – requires a detailed explanation of a term's meaning.

Identify – answer includes who, what, where, when, and why.

Describe – write a representation of the concept.

Discuss – demonstrate an understanding of facts that offers more than one point of view, though perhaps favouring one point of view over the others.

Relate – apply knowledge to actual situations.

Compare – consider something in relation to something else (similarities, differences)

Evaluate – make critical comments backed by evidence, not merely opinion.

Be Confident!

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