

Taking Essay Exams

Taking an essay exam is very different than writing a term paper or take-home report. You'll have only a limited amount of time to compose your thoughts, organize them, and get them down on paper. This may seem a little intimidating, but there is one very important thing you should realize: your professor *does not* expect a perfect essay after just one short hour (or whatever your time limit is). What he or she *does* expect is that you turn in a coherent, intelligent, and readable response that clearly answers the prompt. Here are some tips to help you do just that.

Before the exam. . .

1. Study early and often. Avoid cramming.
 - Focus on big picture issues first. You will remember details more easily this way.
 - Be able to make connections between current and previous course material.
 - Be able to define and apply key terms.
 - Be able to explain and apply key theories and ideas.
 - Be able to explain how key theories and ideas relate to each other.
 - Attend review sessions hosted by you professor or TA. Don't be afraid to ask for help or clarification!
2. Determine the format of the exam.
 - How many essays will you have to answer?
 - How much time will you have?
 - Will you be able to choose from several prompts?
 - How are the questions weighted?
 - Make a plan. Decide how much time you'll allot yourself to answer each question.
3. Brainstorm possible essay exam questions and plan your answers. Outline.
 - Where do you stand on key theories or ideas?
 - What evidence will you use to support your argument?
4. Form a study group. Discussion will help you internalize the information.
5. Practice writing essays.

During the exam. . .

1. Take a deep breath.
2. Read the prompt.
3. Organize. Have an introduction, body, and conclusion.
 - Jot down a quick outline and stick to it.
 - Develop a thesis and argue it throughout.
 - Map out your argument in the introduction.
 - Use clear transitions in the body.
 - Use specific evidence in the body. When you have studied well, the prompt will bring relevant details to mind.
 - Restate your argument and explain why it's significant in the conclusion.

4. Refer back to the prompt and your thesis to make sure you're on track.
5. Ask yourself: **Have I answered the question?**
6. Keep an eye on the clock.

When time is running short...

1. Don't panic!
2. Stay focused.
3. Gather up your final thoughts.
4. Decide where your last moments will be best spent.
 - Summing up your argument?
 - In the conclusion?
 - Highlighting one last point?
5. Keep your handwriting as neat as possible.

Avoid common pitfalls like. . .

1. Panic.
2. The information dump. Don't simply regurgitate every piece of information you know.
3. A weak thesis.
 - The vague, subtle argument.

Friedrich Nietzsche's theory that human beings are driven by a desire for power can be seen in many human interactions.
 - The vast generalization.

Scientists in the 20th century were more interested in the brain chemistry of rats than humans.
 - The overstatement.

Trade policy is the single most important factor in U.S.—Latin America relations.
 - The painfully obvious thesis.

Creationism and evolution are very different ways of explaining speciation.
4. Illegible handwriting. If you can't read it, then neither can your professor or TA.
5. Redundancy.
 - Avoid using the same word sentence after sentence.
 - Don't simply repeat the same thought over and over using different words.