Taking an Essay Exam

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1. About

You may often be asked in college to take essay exams. In certain ways, the same principles for writing good out-of-class essays apply to writing good in-class essays as well. For example, both kinds of essays are more successful when you:

- take into consideration your purpose, audience and information.
- develop a thesis with support.
- support your assertions with evidence.
- guide your readers with transitions.

However, there are some differences to keep in mind as you prepare to write. The most important one is the purpose for writing. For example, usually you write a research paper to learn more about your selected topic, you write essay exams, however, to demonstrate your knowledge. You are not only conveying information, but also proving to your audience—the examiner—that you have mastered the information and can work with it. In other words, your purpose is both informative and persuasive. The suggestions below will help you keep your purpose in mind as you prepare for and write the essay.

2. Preparing for the exam

Study connections between ideas

Your instructor is not looking for a collection of unrelated pieces of information. Rather, he or she wants to see that you understand the whole picture—how the generalizations or concepts create the framework for the specific facts, and how the examples or details fill in the gaps. So, when you're studying, try to think about how the information fits together.

Prepare practice questions

If your instructor has given you the questions themselves or a list of study questions in advance, practice answering those questions. Otherwise, try to anticipate questions your instructor is likely to ask and practice answering those. At the very least, outline how you would answer the test questions; it's better, however, to actually write out the answers. Then you will know where you need to study more.

3. Taking the exam

While you're taking the exam, remember that it's not simply what you say or how much you say, but how you say it that's important. You want to show your instructor that you have mastered the material and that you can discuss it in a coherent, organized fashion.

Plan your time

Although you will be working under pressure, take a few minutes to plan your time. Determine how many minutes you can devote to each answer. You will probably want to devote most of your time to the questions that are worth the most points, perhaps answering those questions first. On the other hand, you might want to answer first the questions that you are best prepared for.

Read the questions thoroughly

Before writing each essay, take a few minutes to read the question carefully to determine exactly what you are being asked to do. Most essay exam questions, or "prompts," are carefully worded and contain specific instructions about what you are to write about as well as how you should organize your answer. The prompt may use one or more of the following terms. If you see one of these terms, try to organize your essay to respond to the question or questions indicated. You might want to underline or highlight the sentences in the prompt that contain these terms to help you focus on them as you write your answer.

Classify:	Into what general category does this
	idea belong? Into what categories can

this idea be divided?

Comparc: What are the similarities among these

ideas? What are the differences?

Contrast: What are the differences between

these ideas?

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

Define: What does this word or phrase mean?

Describe: What are the important

characteristics or features of this

idea/7

Evaluate: What are the arguments for and

against this idea? Which arguments

are stronger?.

Explain: Why is this the case?

Identify: What is this idea? What is its name?

Interpret: What does this idea mean? Why is it

important?

Justify: Why is this correct? Why is this true?

Outline: What are the main points and

essential details?

Summarize: Briefly, what are the important ideas?

Trace: What is the sequence of ideas or

order of events?

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Tobias Bleicker

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