Strategies for Success in Essay Exams

Essay exams measure three key abilities

1. Ability to store, access, and translate appropriate knowledge into an organized essay
2. Ability to analyze specific requirements of an exam question and to formulate a fitting response
3. Ability to deal with time pressure, text anxiety, and other logistical constraints

Preparing for Essay Exams

✓ Identify and learn main ideas from course readings and lectures.
  - Key theories
  - Key terminology: read chapter subheadings, chapter summary, questions, etc.
  - Examples of main ideas covered in class

✓ Be ready to apply concepts to other situations.
  - “Based on the ‘virtues’ for good living that Benjamin Franklin outlines in his Autobiography, how do you think he would feel about the virtues and values children are raised with today?”

✓ Make a study plan.
  - Ask instructor for general exam guidelines (how many questions, what types of questions, etc.)
  - Have friends in class make up possible study questions or essay questions and exchange: practice!

Analyze Exam Questions

✓ Carefully read over the entire exam first; find out how many questions you need to answer, how many points each question is worth, etc.

✓ Figure out how much time you have and how best to use it. Write down the actual clock time that you expect to take for each question, and stick to it. This will help you avoid spending all your time on only one question.

✓ Circle noun phrases that refer to specific knowledge or concepts.

✓ Circle “action” verbs or directive verbs; Below is a list of commonly used verbs.

  Analyze: break up an argument or concept into parts and examine the relationship among the parts. Ex: “Analyze the effectiveness of President Bush’s State of the Union Address.”

  Compare: note similarities between two or more objects or ideas

  Contrast: note differences between two or more objects or ideas

  Trace: show the development or progression of something over time

  Critique: evaluate an argument or idea, pointing out both strengths and weaknesses

  Define: provide a clear, concise, authoritative meaning for an object or idea. Ex: “Explain how the Supreme Court defines ‘equality’ in Plessy v. Ferguson (1896)?”

  Illustrate: give one or more examples, cases, or other concrete instances to clarify a general concept
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Organizing a Good Response

✓ Sketch a rough outline of the main points you want to cover with each question before you begin. This will prevent you from leaving anything crucial out of your answer.

✓ State a thesis: forecast your answer. Use the language of the exam question if possible. If you were responding to the prompt above, you might begin: “The Supreme Court defines ‘equality’ in Plessy v Ferguson in three basic ways: a, b, and c.” Then you would go on in your answer to define “a,” “b,” and “c.”

✓ Utilize a logical presentation: one main point per paragraph with clear transitions between paragraphs.

✓ Write a conclusion which ties together the main points you covered in your answer and that reiterates your thesis; do not bring up any new information in your conclusion.

Dealing with Time Constraints During Exam

✓ Read question over a few times; do not rush to begin writing.

✓ Frontload your response: your first paragraph should be a nutshell or preview of your entire answer.

✓ Worry only about covering the required question; do not worry about being creative.

✓ Avoid writing more than the question asks you to do.

✓ If you run out of time when you are writing an answer, jot down the remaining main ideas from your outline, just to show that you know the material and with more time could have continued your exposition.

✓ Leave some time at the end for proofreading.

✓ Take all of the time you have been allotted for the exam. Reread, rework, and rethink your answers if you have extra time at the end, rather than giving up and handing the exam in the minute you have written your last sentence.

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Developing Your Essay