

# Essay Exam Strategies

Essay exams are quite challenging and require you to do more than simply memorize facts because you need to express relationships through logical thinking and develop an essay through a firm grasp of writing skills. Although essay exams may seem overwhelming at first, with good preparation you can do well on these exams.

## Strategies to prepare for essay exams

### **Name major themes from the course**

These are the “big pictures” you should know by the end of the class. You can often locate these from your course syllabus listed as the *Course Objectives and Goals*. You can also get tips from your textbook’s introductory material and the table of contents. Also, do not forget to peruse your course notes for themes and topics you can pick out.

### **Create summary notes**

From the major themes you select in the step above, create summary notes for further study. These can take the form of lists or categories to help remember information, comparison charts for comparing and contrasting, two-column notes of book and lecture notes, flashcards, chapter outlines, visual mappings, large hierarchies, SQ4R notes, etc.

### **Predict and write test questions**

Work with at least one other person to predict essay questions and answers with a realistic time limit.

### **Create detailed notes on potential topics**

If you know potential exam topics in advance, create as much information as you can. This should include summary notes, predicting and writing test questions, and much practice writing potential questions.

### **Plan your time wisely for take-home essays**

Allow yourself plenty of quality time to develop thorough essay answers. Again, utilize summary notes, predict and write test questions, and be sure to create and follow a study plan. Allow yourself time to set your essay aside for one day so that you can come back to it later to find ways to try to strengthen it.

## Strategies for answering essay exams

### **Identify and underline direction and key words**

Examples of direction words: Compare, contrast, define, summarize, analyze, describe, explain, illustrate, identify, and so on.

### **Thesis sentence or thesis statement**

This is a very important part in opening your essay. You should clearly state the topic, include identified key words, show you understand the direction word(s), and give your readers an idea of how many main ideas you plan to incorporate.

### **Organizational plan first**

Create an initial detailed organization of your essay. You can do this through an outline, visual mapping, hierarchy, or simply a basic list.

### **Develop the body, conclude strong, proofread, and revise**

Your thesis statement should clearly guide the body of your essay. You should expand your organizational plan into paragraphs. Each paragraph should represent one main idea and make sure to include a thorough conclusion that summarizes your main points. Finally, make sure to proofread and revise as necessary.

Adapted from: Wong, L. (2006). *Essential study skills* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

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