

## ESSAY EXAMINATIONS

Depending on the course and on your professor's purposes, the examinations that you take in college will be problem tests, objective tests, or essay tests. Of these, the essay examination is probably the most frightening for college freshmen. The essay test, however, gives you the most flexibility in answering and the best chance to impress your professor with your knowledge and writing ability. To succeed on an essay test, though, you must do two things:

1. Be prepared mentally and physically.
2. Apply effective test-taking techniques during the exam.

### PREPARING FOR ESSAY EXAMINATIONS

For a major examination, preparation should not begin the night before. It should start at the beginning of the semester and extend through the exam.

#### MENTAL PREPARATION

**Long-range preparation.** To be ready for an essay exam, begin working far in advance.

**First,** attend class everyday and sit close to the front where you can hear the professor.

**Second,** take thorough and well-organized lecture notes and review them daily as soon after class as possible.

**Third,** read the textbook using a study method in which you survey, read, recite, and review all the daily and weekly assignments.

**Short-term preparation.**

1. About a week before the exam, use time outside of class to review, organize, and synthesize the material the exam will cover—textbook notes *and* lecture notes.
2. Determine whether the professor has emphasized the textbook or the lecture, and using this as a basis, write an outline or a table of contents for the course material. On this outline, list only the major blocks and sub-blocks of material covered in the course.
3. Then make a detailed study guide for each section. Use loose-leaf paper or large index cards and write only on one side. Think of test questions the professor might ask and answer them on your study sheets.
4. Write an outline of the information, including enough material to trigger your recall of all essential information, but not so many details that your study sheets become unmanageable.
5. Try anticipating a type of question such as comparison/contrast and arrange your information accordingly.

**Last-minute preparation.** If you follow the procedures above, you are well on your way to success, but don't underestimate the importance of studying the night before. Although cramming a semester's reading and studying into one night or even into one week is impossible, studies show that using the night or morning before the exam for a final review leads to a better grade. If you have made good study sheets, they are all that you need for this final review. As you review, use a blank card or paper to cover the information under each heading. Then recite aloud or in your mind the information you've hidden. Repeat this procedure with all main headings until you know thoroughly all the information on your study sheets. This **writing-reciting** procedure is **active** rather than **passive** and will help you to remember material better and longer.

## PHYSICAL PREPARATION

1. At the beginning of each semester, set up a study schedule. This schedule should allow plenty of time for studying, as well as for eating, sleeping, and relaxing. At exam time your discipline will pay off in an alert mind and body.
2. The night before the exam, you should review your study sheets and then get a good night's sleep. Don't stay up so late that you will be sleepy the next morning.
3. On the morning of the exam, get up early and allow plenty of time to get to class and give your study sheets one last look.
4. Go into the exam room a few minutes early—not enough so that you get nervous while waiting, but enough to find a seat and prepare for the professor's entrance.
5. Relax. Usually it is good not to talk to other students about the test: it is too late to go back and study, and if someone brings up a point on which you are unprepared, you might panic and forget information that you know well.

## TAKING AN ESSAY EXAM

Have you ever scored low on an essay exam because you didn't read the directions or finish the test in time? Almost everyone has had such an experience, but learning test-taking strategies can help you present the information you know in the most effective and impressive manner possible.

1. **Read through the entire examination**, paying close attention to the directions and noting whether you are to answer all questions or only some. Quickly reading through the test gives an overview of the information to be covered and may prevent unnecessary and time-consuming overlap in your answers. As you read each question, also jot in the margins key words and phrases for points that come to your mind. Otherwise, you may forget some of these points when answering the questions.
2. **Budget your time.** After reading the questions, determine (1) the total time allowed for the test, (2) the total number of questions to be answered, and (3) the point value for each question. Then plan how you will use your time, allowing a short planning period and a review period, but saving most of your time for answering the questions. Considering the point value of each question, you should divide the total time into sub-blocks. The illustration below shows how you might budget time for a one-hour exam with four test questions, each of different point values.

### TIME USAGE ON A ONE-HOUR TEST

Planning (10 minutes)  
Answer 10% question (5 minutes)  
Answer 50% question (18 minutes)  
(the order of 50% question and 30% question may be switched)  
Answer 30% question (12 minutes)  
Answer 10% question (5 minutes)  
Proofreading and review (10 minutes)

3. **Follow directions.** Be sure that you understand the directions so that you can follow them closely. If you have been asked to list or enumerate certain items, do that and only that, numbering each item and arranging your answer in logical order. If you have been asked to list, don't discuss; if you have been asked to discuss, don't list.
4. **Plan your answers.** Use scratch paper or the inside cover of a blue book to make a rough outline of the ideas to discuss and their relationships. An answer calling for listing items will require an outline to determine the order of items; a discussion question, on the other hand, will require a more detailed outline.
5. **Answer questions clearly, directly, and completely.** Give your thesis or main idea in the first sentence. If you have two or three sub-points, indicate this in your thesis (example: The Indians of North and South America differed in their civilizations, their governments, their religions, and their property concepts). As you develop your thesis, include specific and thorough support, but don't ramble. In a short essay question, your thesis (with sub-topics) can probably be developed in a paragraph. A longer essay question, however, may require that you develop your thesis with a short essay of three or four paragraphs. In either case, pay close attention to transitions, and include a concluding statement.
6. **Can't remember the answer to a question?** Leave space and return to it after you have responded to the others. The answer may come to you before you finish the test. Also, it is a good idea to leave wide margins and blocks of space after each answer to add points that you may remember later.
7. **Proofread your answers.** Rereading your answers will give you a chance to catch careless mistakes in spelling and punctuation as well as in content. Reviewing your answers may also help you think of points that had not occurred to you earlier. If this happens, you will be glad you left extra time and space to add to your answers.