

Essay-Style Exam Writing

Focus, strategy, and timing are key elements in effective exam essay writing. You need to pay close attention to what the questions are asking, and you need to plan your answers. In most respects, an exam essay is like a term paper: it should be direct, focused, organized, and well supported. Furthermore, contrary to popular belief among students, grammar, clarity, proper punctuation and correct word choice all still count. You should avoid repetition, be coherent, and be concise. Of course, this is all much easier said than done, but the following steps should help you develop a process that allows you to write your best exam essay.

1. **Review.** Re-read everything you can, and read anything that you may not have gotten to during the term. To do your best on the exam, you need to be able to demonstrate knowledge of and a familiarity with as much course material as possible, illustrating the ability to draw conclusions, see patterns, and make comparisons. Writing or typing your notes is also a valuable exercise, because it involves a greater degree of engagement than just skimming over the lecture material.
2. **Do pre-exam writing.** Preparation for exam essays actually begins prior to the exam itself. Just as you would not go into a calculus exam without having done practice questions, you must put in a similar amount of work in advance to receive a high grade on an exam essay. Whether you do so individually or in a group, it is important to devise potential essay questions ahead of time. You can derive these topics from major themes and issues you have discussed in class, or from independent work.

Once you have a few options, start brainstorming thesis statements. Make connections between the various works you have studied, and try to formulate responses relevant to the particular course. (For example, if you are in a class that focuses on the representation of animals in Victorian literature, it is not enough to remark that both *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Great Expectations* feature physically and/or emotionally abused characters. Rather, it is more effective to specify that the consistent animal imagery in the former and the borrowed rhetoric from Darwin's *Origin of Species* in the latter suggest a parallel between human and animal natures in these novels.)

Prepare outlines. These can be skeleton outlines, containing just a thesis and main sub-arguments, or you can construct very detailed ones; you can even write out the entire essay if you are so inclined. The main purpose of this preparation is to stimulate your critical and analytical thinking so that you do not lose time for actual writing during the exam.

3. **Read carefully through the entire exam.** Often, instructors will specify that a work or an author cannot be discussed multiple times in one section or on the entire exam. In the case of such exclusions, you will need to plan accordingly. Furthermore, pay close attention to how many sources or points you need to use in each essay. Finally, underlining key words (analyze, discuss, compare/contrast, etc.) in each question ensures that you understand what is being asked, and gives you clues as to how you should structure your own thesis statements.
4. **Determine the order in which you will approach the questions.** Some students prefer to answer the questions sequentially, while others like to start with the more difficult questions, or the ones worth the most marks. Choose according to what will reduce your stress level.

5. **Budget a particular amount of time for each question.** Instructors will often include suggested time frames for each section of the exam that typically correspond to the number of marks that the sections are worth. Keep these in mind, but work to your strengths – if you find essay writing more difficult than passage analysis, start with the essay. However, try to adhere to the schedule you make, since it is better to have extra time at the end than not to finish. Ideally, you will leave yourself five to ten minutes at the end for review or to return to a question.
6. **Prepare a brief outline.** Before you start writing, take a few minutes to plan the organization of your response. This will keep you focused, and it will help you present your ideas in a more coherent fashion than will a “think-as-you-go” method. At this point you should come up with specific references to the course material, whereas if you begin writing right away, you risk producing more vaguely formulated arguments.

For exam essays, an outline means preparing your thesis statement, figuring out which sources you are going to use, jotting down the evidence from each one, and deciding on the order of your arguments. Your thesis should only be a sentence or two, and will ideally rephrase the question’s essential terms into a statement. Do not get preoccupied writing an extensive introduction or conclusion. Preparing an outline for passage analyses and other types of questions is also extremely useful.

7. **Write directly, quickly, and legibly.** Try not to dwell too much on the phrasing of your essay, and do not write for the sake of it. Do not provide too much background information or “padding” (any information not directly relevant. Keep it simple.
8. **Revise.** Try to leave yourself enough time to proofread your answers and to correct any spelling or grammatical mistakes. Instructors might be more lenient when marking exams, but there is no guarantee that you will not be penalized for such errors. Moreover, the person marking your exam will understand and appreciate your ideas far more easily if they are presented clearly and correctly.