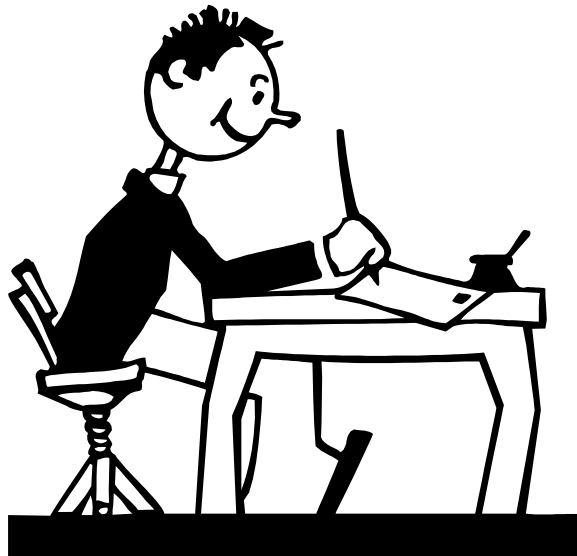


# **A GUIDE TO TAKING ESSAY TESTS**



**ACADEMIC SUPPORT CENTER**

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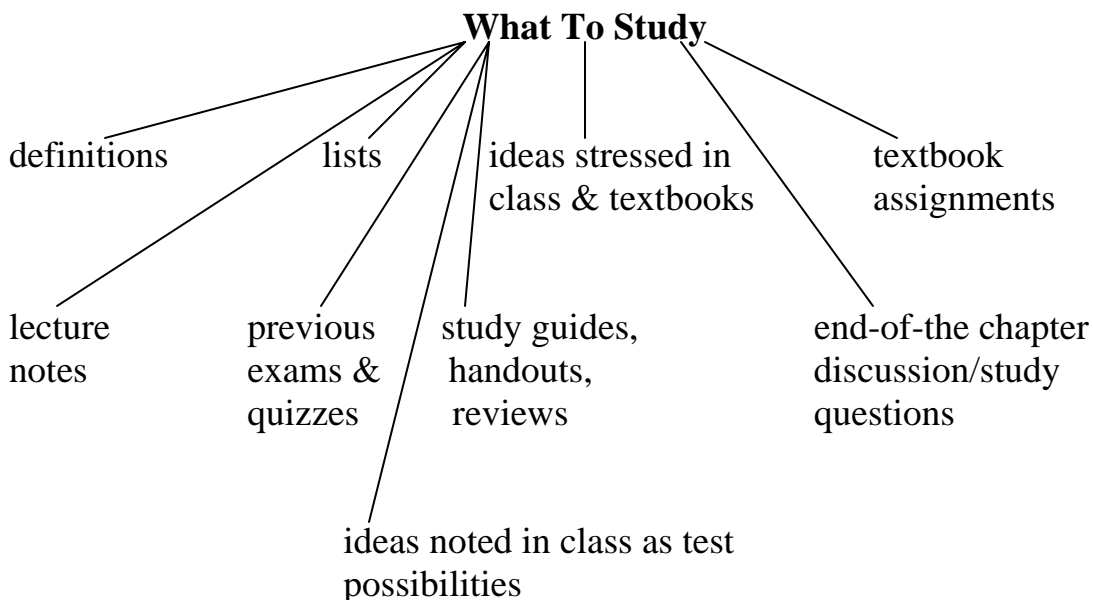
# TAKING ESSAY TESTS

## Essay vs. Objective Exams

In taking an objective test, you need to recognize many details and major points. Essay tests, however, require that you remember main ideas and important details and examples, and then write well-organized statements using that information. You have to generate information yourself rather than select the correct response.

Your task, then, is to sort out major ideas and details from a wealth of information. The discussion questions (if there are any) at the end of chapters will help direct you in this quest. Predicting your own essay questions based on your experience on other essay exams given by this instructor is also a valuable exercise.

Essay test preparation requires that you review and examine information from several sources:



## Kinds Of Essay Questions

### Short Answer:

This type of essay question asks you to write a phrase or a sentence or two. Because the expected answer is so brief, you will need to be to the point in your answer. Be sure to ask your instructor if short answer questions need to be answered in complete sentences. If they do not, avoid wasting your time—respond in phrases because sentence writing, when unnecessary, will severely cut into your time.

An example of a short answer essay question and an appropriate response follow:

Question: Briefly tell the difference between compressive and tensile strength. Cite one example of each.

### Answer:

Compressive—ability to withstand forces tending to shorten material.  
Example: concrete.

Tensile—ability to withstand forces tending to lengthen material.  
Example: steel.

In this example, the student has directly answered the question clearly and completely most likely receiving full credit for the answer. A less accurate and unacceptable response follows:

### Answer:

Compressive doesn't shorten.  
Tensile doesn't lengthen.  
Examples are steel and concrete.

The gist of the definitions is provided, but the explanation is incomplete. It is unclear to which type of strength each example belongs. This student may have received partial credit for the answer.

Short Essay:

In this question format, you need to respond with good, solid paragraphs. Usually, four to five sentences are sufficient. Begin with a topic sentence followed by sentences giving details and concrete examples. Your topic sentence should be the only generality presented. Each subsequent sentence must relate to the topic and must follow logically.

An example of a good short essay answer follows:

Question: Discuss the five qualities associated with marbling.

Answer:

The amount of marbling in a piece of meat indicates several things. First, it predicts eating quality. Secondly, a high level of marbling increases the caloric level. This is often seen as a drawback of marbling. Third, it indicates amount of time on feed. Higher degrees of marbling require increased feeding. Fourth, the type of feed used is related to marbling. Concentrated feed provides more marbling than does roughage. Finally, the animal's genetic tendency toward fat deposit is a factor in the degree of marbling.

This student began with a topic sentence and clearly and deliberately explained all five qualities. Full credit would probably be given for this answer.

An example of a disorganized answer to the same question follows:

Answer:

If an animal's parents have a lot of fatty deposits, the animal probably will. If an animal eats a lot, it will have a lot of fat. If you eat a lot of marbled food, you'll get fat, too!

Notice that this answer basically covers three of the five qualities of marbling. It fails to mention the word "marbling" in its discussion, and it has no topic sentence. This student may receive partial credit for the response.

### Extended Essay:

In this test format, you will be asked to respond to one or two essay questions. Your answer to an extended essay item will be comprised of several paragraphs. Just as if you were writing a paper, you will have an introduction, body, and conclusion to your answer.

Your introductory paragraph should provide a general statement which relates to the question posed. The rest of this paragraph should relate to what is coming up in the body. Usually, an exposition of the major points you intend to cover in the body will complete your first paragraph.

The body will more thoroughly present your ideas about each point. Each paragraph in this section should have its own topic sentence and logical ordering. Guard against allowing wandering or out-of-place thoughts to enter your paragraph, thus destroying its consistency.

The conclusion serves as a summary of your essay. It may include an observation you have drawn related to the topic.

Your extended essay answer will surely be judged on its organization as well as its content. It needs to have a recognizable introduction, body, and conclusion. Transitions—words like "in conclusion", "for example", "first", "second", "therefore" –will assist you in writing a cohesive answer.

An example of an extended essay follows:

Question: Describe the change in the economic function of the family since the rural era and the social systems that conflict with the family today.

Answer:

Two dynamic forces that have altered the American family since the rural era are the economic function of the family and the social system that surrounded it. These two forces have worked together in creating challenges for the family unit.

The rural family was a cooperative work unit. Since all members worked at home, children patterned their behavior after their parents. There were no outside forces that could compete with the family influence on attitudes and behavior.

Modern family life first required the father to work outside of the home. In most families today, both parents leave home to work. This exodus by the parents has caused a demise in the influence of family values and morals on the children. Schools, childcare centers, and parent substitutes (babysitters, television) have a greater impact on the development of children than parents do in many families. Along with this lessened

influence by parents, children are also now dependent on their parents longer than during the rural era.

There have been five major social systems that have conflicted with the family since the rural era. First, schools have become large institutions in which children are influenced more by peer groups than by the home. Secondly, industry has caused many families to move to new locations—often several times. The nuclear family, then, must leave friends, family, neighborhoods, and schools. This becomes a stressor to the family and to comfortable development for the children. Third, tax policies penalize families in which the husband and wife earn fairly high incomes. Filing as singles often saves money, which creates disillusionment with marriage as an economically feasible institution. Fourth, the welfare system affects the potential of the family to have two parents present. Often, if the husband is unemployed, he must go into hiding or move so that the family can receive welfare payments. Finally, the urge toward upward mobility causes the job and promotions to become more important than the welfare of the family unit. Material signs of success can become more important than family unity.

Many changes have occurred in the role of the family since the rural era. These changes have presented challenges to the survival of American family units. Hopefully, an understanding of these factors can assist the modern family in coping with the forces of a rapidly changing world.

## **Taking An Essay Test**

### Planning:

1. Read the directions carefully. The directions may tell you how many essay questions to answer, how long your answers are expected to be, or how your answers should be structured.
2. Listen to the instructions given orally by the instructor. Last-minute comments may include important items such as the amount of time you have to complete the test, which questions will be most heavily weighted and whether you can use a dictionary or other reference aid. Also, there may be changes to the test that you will surely want to note.
3. Notice the point value for each essay you need to write. This will allow you to determine how much time you can spend on each item.

4. Read through all the essay items. Ask questions to clarify items at this point, if necessary.
5. Begin writing immediately and watch your time so that you will be able to respond adequately to each item. If an item confuses you, skip it and answer it last.

For each item:

1. Do a pre-writing activity. Good use of your prewriting time will allow you to avoid confusion in your writing. Quickly write down the points you will include in your answer. Rearrange the order of this list so that items logically follow. Do this by numbering rather than rewriting the entire list. The wording of the question will probably alert you as to what form of ordering to use (see “Reading the Essay Question” on page 8). Watch for questions with multiple parts. It is easy to get involved with one part and overlook the rest.
2. Draft your answer. Begin with an introductory paragraph. It helps to reword the question and to use it as the opening sentence of your introduction. Follow your introduction with a body and conclusion. It will be important to:
  - a. Place emphasis on points about and aspects of the topic with which you are most familiar. This is one of the main advantages of essay tests for the student. They allow you to focus most strongly on aspects of the content you understand best.
  - b. Check to be sure that you have only one major point in each paragraph. Make these points easy to find by putting them at the beginning of paragraphs.
  - c. Use complete sentences, avoiding abbreviations and slang.
  - d. Back each main point with specific details and examples. Remember that you are convincing your instructor that you know the material.
  - e. Include your own opinion only if you are asked for it in the question.
  - f. Use ink, which is easier to read than pencil.
  - g. Use 8 1/2” by 11” paper unless specifically asked not to.
  - h. Put your name on each sheet of paper. Number each page.
  - i. Watch spacing. Leave space between items and at margins for your instructor’s remarks.

3. Revise your draft.
  - a. If you think of ideas that you inadvertently left out, write them in the margin as neatly as possible. Clearly mark on your draft where these additional ideas should be inserted.
  - b. Make sure that your draft is logical. Does one point lead to the next as you had hoped it would? If not, add elements to make it logical or renumber paragraphs.
  - c. Add transitional words, phrases, or sentences to clarify where needed. Finally, proofread your answer, looking for correct use of capitalization, punctuation, grammar, and spelling.
4. If time runs out, quickly write down ideas you would have included. You may get partial credit.
5. If you don't know or can't remember the answer, write something. Relate what you know to the question as much as possible. You may get a few points for making an attempt. You may even surprise yourself and begin to recall information relevant to the question as you struggle to connect to it.

### **Reading Essay Questions**

Key words are used by instructors to formulate essay questions. These words guide the direction your answer takes. You will surely lose points if you discuss the question's topic in an inappropriate way. Following is a series of diagrams which categorize guide words used in essays, indicate the type of answer expected, and give an example of an essay question which utilizes each particular word. These words illustrate the variety of logic instructors may ask you to use in formulating essay answers.

## LITERAL UNDERSTANDING

<b>Sub-topic</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example</b>
Discuss	Talk about all sides of an issue.	Discuss the causes of juvenile delinquency.
List/Enumerate	Discuss points one by one without showing interrelationships.	List the stages of growth according to Ericson.
State	Brief, concise statement of a fact or position.	State the reasons for having patients maintain a diet diary.
Review	Summarize in chronological order or in order of importance.	Review fashion design trends of the past 20 years.
Define	Give an accurate meaning of a term and some details/examples.	Define hydraulics.
Summarize/Outline/Survey	Briefly cover main points.	Summarize the four major theories of management.

## SEEING RELATIONSHIPS

(See how two or more things are connected)

<b>Sub-heading</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example</b>
Compare	Show similarities and differences.	Compare Forkner and Gregg styles of shorthand.
Contrast	Show differences and similarities	Contrast orthographic and isometric drawings.
Relate	Show how connected ideas group (usually in order of importance)	Relate short-term to long-term memory.
Trace	Present ideas in sequence with emphasis in time order, cause/effect.	Trace major changes in the internal combustion engine from 1950-1991.
Classify	Place like ideas in a group.	Classify security guards into three categories.

## CRITIQUE/JUDGE

(make and support a value statement)

<b>Sub-heading</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example</b>
Evaluate	Make a value judgment backed with evidence.	Evaluate the contributions of physics to the field of medicine.
Examine	Present evidence to support a point.	Examine the strategies society has used to treat mental illness.
Justify	Tell why a point of view is right.	Justify the use of force in apprehending a suspect.
Criticize	Point out the good and bad points about something.	Criticize the role of computer technology in the field of commercial art.
Analyze	Present evidence to back a point of view or show quality.	Analyze the arguments for organic farming.

## INFERRING

(Combine ideas and go beyond the facts)

<b>Sub-heading</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example</b>
Explain	Make clear and analyze.	Explain the effects of weather on combustion.
Illustrate	Give examples which show a rule or principle.	Illustrate the effects of the loss of a parent on a child.
Interpret	Explain or show an application of a fact.	Interpret the following statement: "We are what we repeatedly do. Quality, then, is not an act, but a habit." Aristotle

## TAKE A STAND

(Choose and support a position on a topic)

<b>Sub-heading</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example</b>
Prove	Establish that a concept is correct or valid.	Prove that capital punishment is or is not an effective deterrent to crime.
Defend	Take a side on an issue and support it with information.	Defend the patient's right to obtain complete information from medical personnel.

## CREATE A PICTORIAL

(Respond by formulating a graphic representation)

<b>Sub-heading</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example</b>
Diagram	Present answer as a labeled flowchart, diagram or other graphic device.	Diagram the four stages in the internal combustion process.
Describe	Tell how something looks or works so that it can be envisioned by the reader.	Describe an efficient, small scale hog breeding operation.
Illustrate	Show by means of a graphic which complements the question.	Illustrate a cell, labeling its parts.

