

# How to Tackle an In-Class Essay Exam

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## First things first, you need to have a PLAN.

- **Know the test.** How many questions of each type do you have to answer? (e.g. 1 short answer; 1 essay)
- **Know the expectations.** How much is each section worth? (e.g. Short Answer – 30%; Essay – 70%)
- **Plan your time accordingly.** If an essay is worth 70% of the test grade and short answers are worth 30%, you should be prepared to spend around 70% of your time writing the essay, and 30% of the time answering the short answer questions. For an 80 minute test, that works out to roughly: 20min on the Short Answer section and 60 min on the Essay section.
- **Study Smarter (not Harder).** Don't just look through your notes and readings and call that 'studying'. To study effectively, you need to go back through the material with a plan. What are you trying to see? What do you look for first? This will depend on what you're trying to do:
  - **With Short Answer Questions:** look for the definitions, examples, and significance of terms used in class. Think about the things you have read and how they relate together (reviewing lecture slides for clues is a great way to get started)
  - **With Essay Questions:** studying for an essay is more difficult than studying for a short answer. The question is more analytical, requires a greater understanding of course material, and simply requires more course material to thoroughly answer. Professors assign essay exams *precisely because* essays require more skill – so think of essays as an opportunity to showcase what you know. Here are some tips for essay exams...

## Generally, professors/graders expect that a student's essay will:

- Show that the student has done the work (that you actually came to class and did the reading)
- Show that the student understands the course material (what a reading/lecture is actually saying)
- Show that the student can think critically about the course material (relate concepts to each other, compare/contrast different arguments, etc.)
- Show that the student has *learned* (you have more knowledge now than when you started)

## Generally, I encounter 4 problems when grading essay exams (see the corresponding "EXAMPLES" handout)

- Students will ramble on and on, so their point is not very clear and their idea isn't clearly communicated
- Students will be overly vague, and not really engage with any specific details from readings or lecture
- Students will simply summarize the readings without applying the concepts or making some kind of argument
- Students will not pay attention to the specific details of the question, and instead write an essay based on their *interpretation* of the question, rather than the question itself.

## So, your task in an essay exam is to do the following things:

- Understand and respond to **EVERY PART** of the question
  - You have to respond the whole question by breaking it down into its different parts
- Show that you understand the course material by **making some kind of corresponding argument**
  - Often, an argument is *implicit* in the question. You can see the argument just by reading the question.
  - Even though the argument is implicit in the question, you need to make it **EXPLICIT** in your essay; state it clearly. Don't assume that a professor/grader can read your mind or know 'what you really mean' in your writing. They can't, you have to tell them.
- Use **SPECIFIC** course material to **SUPPORT** your argument
  - Keep in mind that I say **SUPPORT** your argument and not **BE** your argument. This is why you cannot just summarize the readings and assume you've answered the question.
  - Answer the question by using some explicit argument (usually the one that is implicit in the question), then use specific examples from the readings and/or lectures to support what you're saying. Using class material is how you 'prove' the argument.
  - Remember, the whole class is structured so that you will be able to use the readings and lectures *in a very specific way*. Most of the time, we know what you should be saying before you actually say it.

## Remember these useful Do's and Don't's:

- **DON'T** forget why essay tests are used in the first place – they are tools to measure that you have done the work and that you have learned what we want you to learn

- **DO** show off your learning; make an argument supported by course material and answer every part of the question.
- **DON'T** just start writing and hope all your ideas will come together while you're writing. Bad idea!
- **DO** plan ahead to ensure that that your writing will be clear, well organized, and well-informed by course material.
- **DON'T** simply summarize the readings. Remember, I've read all the same things you have!
- **DO** tell me why a specific example from the readings/lectures matters for what you're saying.
- **DON'T** say some vague statements and assume that you've made a sufficient argument.
- **DO** try to demonstrate and apply your new knowledge.
- **DON'T** let your anxiety or nervousness get the best of you.
- **DO** remember that you are smart and capable, you should study smarter and harder, and take care of yourself.

## Time to Start Studying! (How to Study Smarter)

For Short Answer questions, use the tips I discussed in the first section

For Essay Questions,

WHEN YOU HAVE THE EXACT (OR ALMOST EXACT) QUESTIONS THAT WILL APPEAR ON THE EXAM:

- First, break down the question into its different parts, and then list them out. This way, you will have a quick way to see what the question is actually asking. Breakdown the question by doing the following:
  - List each sentence in the prompt as a separate bullet point.
  - In each sentence
    - Underline the action words in each sentence (e.g. Define, discuss, compare and contrast, explain)
    - Draw arrows to what the action words relate to (e.g. compare and contrast *the order perspective* and *the conflict perspective*)
    - Circle the readings that you are supposed to use to do that thing (e.g. compare and contrast the order perspective and the conflict perspective as described in the *Eitzen textbook*)
    - Give yourself any other assists you need
- Now you can see the question in its entirety. Also ask yourself: what broad topic is this question dealing with?
- Think about each part of the question and brainstorm. You have a lot of knowledge in that big, beautiful brain; give yourself a chance to take stock of what you know. Write down some of your own initial ideas for responding to each part of the question. Ask yourself: what kind of argument can I make to answer the questions being asked? What kind of points will I have to write about to make this argument? What specific reading/lecture examples might I use to support my argument in each part of the question?
- Start looking through your course material (readings and lecture notes). Were your initial brainstorming ideas right or wrong? What other ideas can you find? What examples can you use to demonstrate a particular idea? Write down or type all of these. Be as inclusive as possible. Don't limit yourself in the studying stage. Try to cover as much material you can while you study.
- Once you've done this, you ARE NOT finished. Now that you have all of your ideas and supporting course material, you need to organize them in a logical and coherent way.
- Make an OUTLINE for the essay. Again, try be as inclusive as possible and don't limit yourself. The most straightforward way to organize your outline is in the same order as the various parts of the question.
- Make at least one outline for every potential essay question. Then, study your outlines.
  - The *strength of this approach* is that it channels your thoughts in a way that is specific to the question being asked. Otherwise, you will be going through material without any plan, and it might not 'sink in'
  - The *weakness of this approach* will be if you are too narrow with what you put into the outline, or if you put incorrect things in your outline. This is why you should be as inclusive as possible; cover your bases

WHEN YOU DON'T HAVE THE EXACT QUESTIONS THAT WILL APPEAR ON THE EXAM:

- Review the main themes in the course so far; what terms have you learned? How do you define each of those terms and can you provide an example?
- Be able to summarize and pull some specific details out of each of the readings you have read so far.
- Can you lump the readings together under basic themes? What are the differences between the readings? Are they saying different things? Are they saying similar things but in different ways?
- What do the readings teach you about the main themes in the course so far?
- NOTE: these tips are very vague, because so much of what you should do depends on the specific context of your course, instructor, and TA.

## Time to Take the Test!

- Before doing anything, take a deep breath. Remember that you are smart and capable, and that you are well prepared because you studied smarter and harder.
- Look at the questions and decide which you want to address first. Do you want to address the short answer questions first and get them out of the way? Would you rather write the essay first? You decide. Remember how much time you need to spend on each section.
- **If you did not have the essay prompt ahead of time, you should still follow the guidelines I set out in the Studying for Essay Questions when you have the questions that will appear on the exam. You will just have to do those steps more quickly and efficiently (which is why you still need to study ahead of time even if the exam is open note)**
- Once you begin, QUICKLY make an outline on the front cover/first page of the blue book that will help you remember the content and organization you planned. Work out how much time you should spend on each section of the essay. Plan your time before you start writing.
  - *Note: when you recreate your outline, use however much detail you need to recall your original outline*
- Start writing and keep your time management plan. Don't write a really long introduction, just a few sentences will do. Keep a mental note of every part of the essay you have written, and what you still have to write.
- Refer back to your outline to keep your writing on track. Remember that when you make an assertion to support it with specific examples from readings/lecture
- Build in 3-4 minutes at the end to re-read your essay. JUST DO IT. *(Trust me on this one, it makes a difference and you will definitely find some mistakes that you want to correct)*