



TIPS ON ESSAY EXAM WRITING

A-State Online Writing Center



Pre-Exam Preparation

- Be involved in the learning process.
 - *Take detailed notes throughout the semester that you'll be able to understand later.*
 - *Participate in discussions and discussion forums.*
 - *Study with peers in small groups to tackle information from different angles. They may notice or interpret a subject in a way that you wouldn't have seen otherwise.*
 - *Try not to memorize facts without purpose. Focus on placing information into related groups that you can recall more easily by association.*

Pre-Exam Preparation

- Listen to your professor when discussing which materials will be covered on the exam and the exam format.
- Meet your basic needs. Make sure to get adequate rest, eat, drink caffeine if you need to, etc. Don't change your routine and throw yourself off your game.
- If you know the question(s) in advance, practice writing your response with a timer.

Breaking Down Question Language

It's vital to understand what the essay question(s) are asking you to answer. It would be a shame to spend so much effort and realize after the fact that you didn't actually respond to the posed question.

There are certain key terms that you can look out for to determine how to approach an essay question →

Breaking Down Question Language: Key Terms

- Analyze/Assess – Break down the segments or main arguments into parts and examine each segment
- Compare and contrast – Show similarities and differences between topics
- Define – Provide a definition or meaning to the subject
- Describe – Give detailed information/characteristics about a topic
- Evaluate – Make an assertion about a topic/provide your opinion with supporting evidence
- Criticism – Make judgements about an assertion or topic, which can involve analysis and evaluation.

Breaking Down Question Language: Key Terms

- Illustrate – Explain points through detailed examples or comparisons.
- Summarize – Provide a condensed version
- Outline – Describe the events, characteristics, or main points
- Trace – Detail a timeline of events/how something has changed
- Apply – Use a specific method/theory to analyze a topic
- Synthesize – Make connections between points to create a thesis. It's similar to comparing and contrasting, but you're trying to explain how they harmonize to illustrate your main argument

Before You Begin Writing

- Read the essay prompt or short answer questions once on a surface level, and then read it again on a deeper level with the intention of critically thinking about what the essay is asking of writers.
- If you're allowed to have a piece of paper or to write on a printed document, take plenty of detailed notes while reading the question or prompt that you can refer to when writing your essay.
- Make a general outline of how you plan to construct/format your essay. It'll make it easier to frame it in advance, particularly if you begin to lose momentum or need centering.
- If there are multiple questions to answer and you feel more prepared for one question in particular, focus first on the one where you can fully explicate your argument with supporting evidence. This is helpful because you won't waste time by stalling.

Suggestions on Writing

- Be clear and concise. Don't use confusing language or high-level jargon without explanation.
- Have a clear thesis statement if you're writing a standard five-paragraph essay. The reader should understand the main point(s) you're arguing throughout your essay.
- Remember to support your main point(s) with textual evidence throughout the body of your paper when applicable.
- Include transitions and transition statements in between paragraphs or sections.
- If you begin to run out of time, explain how you would have finished the essay or write down other main points to show you know the material. You may receive partial credit for effort.
- Proofread if you have time to catch grammar/syntax errors, missing information, or unclear statements.

Suggestions on Writing

- Be mindful of the clock. Don't spend too much time on one section or else you won't be able to flesh out your essay. If you feel stuck, come back to it later.
- If you're taking an exam with multiple short answer questions and feel stuck on any one of them, move on to the next one and go back to the previous question if you have time.
- If you feel stressed, take a moment to close your eyes, take a breath, and refresh your perspective. You've prepared for this exam; you can do this.
- Seek help when in doubt. Ask your professor or exam proctor for clarification if you don't understand a question. While they can't share details or guide you in one direction or another, they should be able to untangle language you feel is ambiguous, formatting queries, etc.

Sources

- <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/essay-exams/>
- <https://depts.washington.edu/pswrite/essayex.html>
- <https://www.csbsju.edu/academic-advising/study-skills-guide/essay-exam>
- <https://www.oxbridgeessays.com/blog/analyse-explain-evaluate-answer-essay-question-words/>
- <https://www.bgsu.edu/content/dam/BGSU/learning-commons/documents/writing/synthesis/asked-to-synthesize.pdf>