School of Liberal Arts

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Taking an Essay Exam

Many students are intimidated by essay exams. This handout is designed to help you minimize your anxiety in order to take the exam with confidence. Of course, nothing can replace sufficient preparation (see our "Preparing for an Essay Exam" handout), but these hints will help you draw on your preparation more effectively.

Once you get into the classroom and have the test in hand, these strategies can help make taking the test less stressful.

1. Read all the instructor's directions carefully. Refer back to them periodically, or even highlight them for quick reference. Even the best answers will not make the grade if you do not follow directions. Be sure to ask questions if you do not understand the instructions.

2. Before writing anything, read over the entire test to see if you have been given a *choice* of items to answer or if you have to answer them all. You can then gauge the amount of information and time you will need to answer the questions.

3. Carefully read each question you choose to answer, **identifying the words that predict what kind of answer you should give.** These clue words are often verbs: *discuss, analyze, compare, explain, trace, cite several instances, etc.* Next, note the significant nouns. For example, in the prompt, "Discuss the main *features of bipolar disorder,"* you would want to address all the pertinent *features of bipolar disorder* to effectively answer the question.

4. **If a test question has more than one part, make sure you answer each of them.** Many professors say that failing to answer all parts of a question is a common cause of low grades. To remember to answer all parts, check off each one as you answer it.

5. Take a moment to briefly write down the points you want to include and in what order you want to present these points. Writing points down will help you remember them once you are deep into answering the question. Preplanning what you will write will keep you on track and lead to a better essay exam.

6. Depending on your instructor's preference, you may want to begin your answer with a portion—or a restatement—of the question. At the very least, state the direction of your essay answer (or the main point or thesis) within the first paragraph.

7. Remember, even when professors say they don't grade on mechanics and spelling, answers that are free of errors will always make a better impression than answers that are carelessly written.

Identifying Key Words in Essay Test Questions

A common problem in answering essay questions is not recognizing what the questions ask you to do and then formulating your answer accordingly. Professors do not want a "brain dump" or just a bunch of unrelated facts and ideas. If you do not address the questions as they are asked, your answers may not meet the professor's expectations, and you will lose points. On the other hand, you do not want to put in extra facts and ideas just to impress the professor.

Each of the following words frequently found in essay questions implies a specific kind of answer.

Key word	What it asks for
Analyze	*Explain the parts* of a concept or idea and tell *why your discussion of them is relevant, significant or meaningful.*
Classify	Divide ideas or concepts into appropriate *categories* or *classifications*
Compare/contrast	Show how two things are alike (compare) or are *different* (contrast)
Evaluate	Review the *positive* and *negative* points about a topic and *come to a conclusion about the value of those points*
Justify	*Explain why* a concept is correct or true
Summarize	*State the main points concisely* without commenting on them

Remember to demonstrate that you understand the whole picture; make connections between ideas and points you make. Make sure that each answer has a specific focus that your facts, details, examples, and concrete evidence relate to. Back up your specific focus in each essay using *notes from lectures* and *class discussions* as well as *assigned readings*. If the question invites you to take a stand on an issue or give your opinion, appropriate support is crucial.

Emphasize your main points in separate paragraphs and show the connections between your points with transitions. Show your instructor that you can discuss the material in a coherent, organized manner. In longer responses, sum up with a brief conclusion.

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