

Essay Test Tactics

Short Essay Questions: Tend to be aimed at your ability to remember and present accurate explanations supported by facts.

Long Essay Questions: Are more often directed at demonstrating your ability to make valid generalizations and support them with sound evidence or apply broad principles to a series of events.

Common words used in Essay Exams

- ❖ **Analyze** – Break into separate parts and discuss, examine or interpret.
- ❖ **Compare** – Examine two or more things and identify similarities.
- ❖ **Contrast** – Examine two or more things and identify differences.
- ❖ **Define** – Give the meaning of, in a context specific to the course.
- ❖ **Describe** – Give a detailed account by explaining characteristics, qualities and parts.
- ❖ **Discuss** – Consider and debate, weighing the pros and cons.
- ❖ **Explain** – Make an idea clear or show logically how a concept is developed.
- ❖ **Illustrate** – Give concrete examples to explain clearly.
- ❖ **Summarize** – Give a brief, condensed account and avoid unnecessary details.
- ❖ **Trace** – Show the order of events or the progress of a subject or event.



Most essay test items are not presented in the form of a question. Instead, they are often phrased as a statement that includes a **direction word**.

The direction word tells you what you should do when you write your answer to the prompt.

Preparing for the Essay

- ❖ Anticipate questions that are likely to be on the test. This requires review of the textbook and notes. Ask yourself, “What are the concepts and relationships involved in this material?”
- ❖ Condense your material by organizing it into major groups or similar concepts.
- ❖ Practice! Whether in the form of answering practice questions out of the textbook or reviewing prompts provided by the professor themselves, there is no substitute for practice.
- ❖ Ensure that you have working knowledge of the course’s vocabulary – getting this done is like tying your shoes before running a race!

During the Exam

- ❖ Budget your time according to the point value of each question and the total number of questions. Be sure to allow time for reviewing and proofreading your work at the end of the exam period.
- ❖ Read all essay questions before you begin writing.
- ❖ Begin with the question that seems easiest then progress to the hardest.
- ❖ When the time you budgeted is up for one question, stop writing, leave space, and begin the next question. The incomplete answers can be completed during your review time – Six incomplete answers will usually receive more credit than three complete ones.
- ❖ Before writing, make a rough outline of your answer. Quickly list the ideas and facts you want to include. Be sure to distinguish main topics from supporting examples.
- ❖ Limit each paragraph to one main idea, including supporting examples and other details.

