Essay Exams

- **Prepare thoroughly!** This is the key to doing well on an essay exam – in order to write a good essay, you need to know what you’re writing about. Try to do as much work as you can outside of class, so there will be less to do when you have a time limit. You may find the following techniques helpful in preparing for an essay exam:

  1. **Talk to the professor!** Learn the format of the exam. Will you have a choice of essays? What is the professor looking for? How much time will you have?
  2. **Go over sample questions.** Many professors will give sample questions, or some type of review sheet. Use it! It is the best way to anticipate what’s going to be on your test. If the professor doesn’t give you review questions, write your own!
  3. **Study in a group.** Once you have a list of sample questions, answer them with a group of classmates. They can give you details that you probably would have forgotten. Choose your group wisely, though; you will want to work with people who have similar study habits.

If you study well, then the hard work will be out of the way. The exam should be the easy part, especially if you remember the following guidelines:

- **Don’t Panic!** If you have studied, you probably know the answer. But in order to write coherently, you must keep a clear head.
- **Read the question carefully.** Be certain that you understand exactly what is being asked. Underline key words and phrases.
- **Plan your time.** Allot time for each question based on the number of points it is worth. Make yourself stick to the time limits you have set for yourself.
- **Plan your answer before beginning to write.** Start with a “mind dump” – generate a grocery list of all the ideas that relate to the question. Pick two or three of the best ideas and arrange them for the best effect, then figure out what details and illustrations you want to use to back up each point. About 10% of your total time should be spent planning.
- **Have an explicit thesis.** You can often just rework the question. For example, if you are asked to explain the attitudes of the environmental philosophers towards the Enlightenment, you could begin your essay with the simple thesis: “The ideas of the Enlightenment have come under sharp attack from environmental philosophers.” This type of simple, purposeful sentence will focus the rest of the essay and help provide a coherent answer.
- **When you’re halfway through your time limit,** check to see that you are roughly halfway through your outline. If you’re falling behind, quickly jot down what you had planned to say – either in outline form to one side, or within the essay, leaving space to elaborate.

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**Essay Exam Checklist**

- Bring one more bluebook than you think you’ll need (if bluebooks are provided).
- Bring extra (sharpened) pencils and (working) pens.
- Bring your “lucky” pen or pencil. Just about everyone has one, and it will be surprisingly reassuring to have it there.
- **Bring a watch!** This is critical to planning your time well. Don’t count on a working clock being in the room.

**A simple Five-Step Approach**

1. **Think** about the question, Generate a grocery list of relevant ideas – a mind dump.
2. Turn your question into a declarative sentence, repeating key words. This will become your thesis.
3. Pick two or three of the best ideas from the grocery list and arrange them for effect.
4. Develop each point with details, illustrations, and reasons. This is where you should spend most of your time.
5. Conclude – bring your essay to an end.

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