



Essay Exams

Students stress about essay exams due to the time limit, difficulties preparing, and fear of not knowing what to write about during the test. These strategies will help you feel ready to write and succeed at exam time.

How to prepare:

- Talk to your professor to find out about the exam format, including recommended essay length, whether you will have a choice of topics, and what the time limit will be.
- Review your class notes, looking for big ideas and themes throughout the course that you could incorporate into an essay.
- Go over sample questions if your professor provides them for you. If not, you can create your own questions for practice, based on the topics covered in class.
- Once you have sample questions, study with a group of classmates. They can remind you of details that you probably would have forgotten. Be sure to work with people who have similar study habits!

What to do during the exam:

- Don't panic! If you used the steps above to prepare, you probably know the answer. Keep a clear head to write coherently.
- Read the question carefully to make sure you understand exactly what is being asked. Underline key words and phrases to keep yourself focused.
- Create a timeline for yourself — allot time for each question based on the number of points it is worth.
- Plan your answer before you start to write. Generate a list of all the ideas you have for the question, then pick two or three of your best points (make sure they are related in some way) to use in the essay. Use about 10% of your time to plan.
- Make sure to have an explicit thesis. With essay exams, you can often just rework the question. For example, if you are asked to explain the attitudes of the environmental philosophers towards the Enlightenment, your thesis could be “The ideas of the Enlightenment have come under sharp attack from environmental philosophers due to [insert the ideas from the above step here].”
- At the halfway point in the time you have allotted for yourself, check to see that you are about halfway through the outline you made for the essay. If you're falling behind, cut some of the details you planned to include or quickly jot down what you had planned to say on the margin or within the essay itself, getting your ideas on paper while leaving room to elaborate.

