



Writing Essay Exams

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What is a well written answer to an essay question?

It is...

Well Focused

Be sure to answer the question completely, that is, answer all parts of the question. Avoid "padding." A lot of rambling and ranting is a sure sign that the writer doesn't really know what the right answer is and hopes that somehow, something in that overgrown jungle of words was the correct answer.

Well Organized

Don't write in a haphazard "think-as-you-go" manner. Do some planning and be sure that what you write has a clearly marked introduction which both states the point(s) you are going to make and also, if possible, how you are going to proceed. In addition, the essay should have a clearly indicated conclusion which summarizes the material covered and emphasizes your thesis or main point.

Well Supported

Do not just assert something is true, prove it. What facts, figures, examples, tests, etc. prove your point? In many cases, the difference between an A and a B as a grade is due to the effective use of supporting evidence.

Well Packaged

People who do not use conventions of language are thought of by their readers as less competent and less educated. If you need help with these or other writing skills, come to the Writing Lab!

How do you write an effective essay exam?

1. Read through all the questions carefully.
2. Budget your time and decide which question(s) you will answer first.
3. Underline the key word(s) which tell you what to do for each question.
4. Choose an organizational pattern appropriate for each key word and plan your answers on scratch paper or in the margins.
5. Write your answers as quickly and as legibly as you can; do not take the time to recopy.
 - A. Begin each answer with one or two sentence thesis which summarizes your answer. If possible, phrase the statement so that it rephrases the question's essential terms into a statement (which therefore directly answers the essay question).
 - B. Support your thesis with specific references to the material you have studied.
6. Proofread your answer and correct errors in spelling and mechanics.

Specific organizational patterns and "key words"

Most essay questions will have one or more "key words" that indicate which organizational pattern you should use in your answer. The six most common organizational patterns for essay exams are definition, analysis, cause and effect, comparison/contrast, process analysis, and thesis-support.

Definition

● Typical questions

- "Define X."
- "What is an X?"
- "Choose N terms from the following list and define them."

- **Process**

1. State the term to be defined.
2. State the class of objects or concepts to which the term belongs.
3. Differentiate the term from other members of the class by listing the term's distinguishing characteristics.

- **Example**

Q: "What is a fanzine?"

A: A fanzine is a magazine written, mimeographed, and distributed by and for science fiction or comic strip enthusiasts.

Avoid constructions such as "An encounter group is where ..." and "General semantics is when"

- **Tools you can use**

- Details which describe the term
- Examples and incidents
- Comparisons to familiar terms
- Negation to state what the term is not
- Classification (i.e., break it down into parts)
- Examination of origins or causes
- Examination of results, effects, or uses

Analysis

- **Typical questions**

- "Analyze X."
- "What are the components of X?"
- "What are the five different kinds of X?"
- "Discuss the different types of X."

- **Example:**

Analysis involves breaking something down into its components and discovering the parts that make up the whole.

Q: "Discuss the different services a junior college offers a community."

A: Thesis: A junior college offers the community at least three main types of educational services: vocational education for young people, continuing education for older people, and personal development for all individuals.

Outline for supporting details and examples:

- A. Vocational education
- B. Continuing education
- C. Personal development

- **Useful transition words:**

- first, second, third, etc.
- next
- another
- in addition
- moreover

Cause and Effect

- **Typical questions:**

- "What are the causes of X?"
- "What led to X?"

- "Why did X occur?"
- "Why does X happen?"
- "What would be the effects of X?"

● **Example**

Cause and effect involves tracing probable or known effects of a certain cause or examining one or more effects and discussing the reasonable or known cause(s).

Q: "Define recession and discuss the probable effects a recession would have on today's society."

A: Thesis: A recession, which is a nationwide lull in business activity, would be detrimental to society in the following ways: it wouldA....., it wouldB....., and it wouldC..... .

The rest of the answer would explain, in some detail, the three effects: A, B, and C.

● **Useful transition words:**

- because
- consequently
- therefore
- for this reason
- as a result

Comparison-Contrast

● **Typical questions:**

- "How does X differ from Y?"
- "Compare X and Y."
- "What are the advantages and disadvantages of X and Y?"

● **Example:**

Q: "Which would you rather own--a compact car or a full-sized car?"

A: Thesis: I would own a compact car rather than a full-sized car for the following reasons:A.....,B.....,C....., andD..... .

● **Two patterns of development:**

Pattern 1

- I. Full-sized car
 - A. Advantages
 - B. Disadvantages
- II. Compact car
 1. Advantages
 2. Disadvantages

Pattern 2

- I. Advantages
 - A. Full-sized car
 - B. Compact car
- II. Disadvantages
 - A. Full-sized car
 - B. Compact car

● **Useful transition word**

- on the other hand
- similarly
- yet
- unlike A, B ...
- in the same way
- but
- while both A and B are ..., only B ...
- nevertheless
- on the contrary
- though
- despite
- however
- conversely
- while A is ..., B is ...

Process

○ Typical questions

- "Describe how X is accomplished."
- "List the steps involved in X."
- "Explain what happened in X."
- "What is the procedure involved in X?"

● Process (sometimes called process analysis)

This involves giving directions or telling the reader how to do something. It may involve discussing some complex procedure as a series of discrete steps. The organization is almost always chronological.

○ Example

Q: "According to Richard Bolles' What Color Is Your Parachute?, what is the best procedure for finding a job?"

A: In What Color Is Your Parachute?, Richard Bolles lists seven steps that all job-hunters should follow:A.....,B.....,C.....,D.....,E.....,F....., andG..... .

The remainder of the answer should discuss each of these seven steps in some detail.

● Useful transition words

- first, second, third, etc.
- next
- then
- following this
- finally
- after, afterwards, after this
- subsequently
- simultaneously, concurrently

Thesis and Support

○ Typical questions:

- "Discuss X."
- "A noted authority has said X. Do you agree or disagree?"
- "Defend or refute X."
- "Do you think that X is valid? Defend your position."

● Thesis and support involves stating a clearly worded opinion or interpretation and then defending it with all the data, examples, facts, and so on that you can draw from the material you have studied.

○ Example:

Q: "Despite criticism, television is useful because it aids in the socializing process of our children."

A: Television hinders rather than helps in the socializing process of our children becauseA.....,B....., andC..... .

The rest of the answer is devoted to developing arguments A, B, and C.

● **Useful transition words:**

- therefore
- because
- for this reason
- however
- it follows that
- consequently
- as a result

Excercises

A. Which of the following two answers is the better one? Why?

Question: Discuss the contribution of William Morris to book design, using as an example his edition of the works of Chaucer.

a. William Morris's Chaucer was his masterpiece. It shows his interest in the Middle Ages. The type is based on medieval manuscript writing, and the decoration around the edges of the pages is like that used in medieval books. The large initial letters are typical of medieval design. Those letters were printed from woodcuts, which was the medieval way of printing. The illustrations were by Burn-Jones, one of the best artists in England at the time. Morris was able to get the most competent people to help him because he was so famous as a poet and a designer (the Morris chair) and wallpaper and other decorative items for the home. He designed the furnishings for his own home, which was widely admired among the sort of people he associated with. In this way he started the arts and crafts movement.

b. Morris's contribution to book design was to approach the problem as an artist or fine craftsman, rather than a mere printer who reproduced texts. He wanted to raise the standards of printing, which had fallen to a low point, by showing that truly beautiful books could be produced. His *Chaucer* was designed as a unified work of art or high craft. Since Chaucer lived in the Middle Ages, Morris decided to design a new type based on medieval script and to imitate the format of a medieval manuscript. This involved elaborate letters and large initials at the beginnings of verses, as well as wide borders of intertwined vines with leaves, fruit, and flowers in strong colors. The effect was so unusual that the book caused great excitement and inspired other printers to design beautiful rather than purely utilitarian books.

From James M. McCrimmon, Writing with a Purpose, 7th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980), pp. 261-263.

B. How would you plan the structure of the answers to these essay exam questions?

1. Was the X Act a continuation of earlier government policies or did it represent a departure from prior philosophies?
2. What seems to be the source of aggression in human beings? What can be done to lower the level of aggression in our society?
3. Choose one character from Novel X and, with specific references to the work, show how he or she functions as an "existential hero."
4. Define briefly the systems approach to business management. Illustrate how this differs from the traditional approach.
5. What is the cosmological argument? Does it prove that God exists?
6. Civil War historian Andy Bellum once wrote, "Blahblahblah blahed a blahblah, but of course if blahblah blahblahlahed the blah, then blahblahs are not blah but blahblah." To what extent and in what ways is the statement true? How is it false?

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