

# TWU Counseling Center

## How to Answer Essay Questions

### PREPARING FOR AN ESSAY EXAM

Preparation for an essay exam, as for any exam, requires close and careful re-reading and review of texts and lecture notes. The emphasis in this kind of an exam is on "thought areas,". Where do you start?

**FIRST:** Ask yourself, "What are the major concepts and relationships involved in the material you are reviewing?" Review your notes, omitting detail for the time being. Review major headings and chapter summaries in your textbooks. (Adapt this approach to the course you are taking, of course. In a literature course for instance it will be essential to review in terms of theme, plot, character, tone, and to dissect the readings, including critical opinions.)

### KNOW YOUR INSTRUCTOR

1. Harmonize with his/her style of organization (if there is any), interpretation, synthesis, and specification of details.
2. Indicate in your notes the points stressed.
3. Study more thoroughly the areas in which you are weak.
4. Based upon the instructor's style, try to predict questions that might be asked.
5. Ask what type of questions to expect and the content areas she/he feels are important.

**THEN, LEARN THE MATERIAL!** Boil your material down to a rather tight outline form. These hints work only if you have studied and learned the content.

**FINALLY:** Fit the necessary details into the concepts. On an essay exam, even if it is an open-book exam, you will be facing the task of arriving at a sound generalization and then proving it, through the skillful use of detail, and you must, therefore, have the details at your command. But remember, not every detail is crucial. Select the details that best go to prove the concept. Some students profit by creating sample questions and then generating answers. If you have a standard textbook, try two or three large questions. Of course, part of the groundwork is mastering the terminology used in any course. Some courses require you to be able to manipulate terminology.

### ANSWERING AN ESSAY QUESTION

#### TAKING THE EXAM

1. Briefly look over the entire test to see what is ahead of you.
2. Read the directions and be sure you understand them. If in any doubt, ask.
3. Determine the amount of time you'll need to spend on each question; e.g., more for questions which are weighted heavily. Have a watch or clock.
4. Begin Memory Dump--jot down on a separate piece of paper words, thoughts, facts, figures--anything, which could be used to answer the questions. No need to be organized, you can do it when you begin each question in earnest. Add to your list for each question as material pops into your mind.
5. Watch for qualifiers in the questions!

#### MAKE SURE YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU HAVE BEEN ASKED TO DO WITH THE QUESTION.

Make sure you understand the question. Essay questions are very carefully and precisely worded. You will get no credit for answering a question you have not been asked. Yet, this is probably the most common error students make. They prepare carefully, and write out a lengthy and well-organized answer, and cannot understand why they fail. They fail because they have not answered the question they were asked.

An essay question always has a controlling idea expressed in one or two key words. Find the key words and underline them. Suppose you were asked, "Describe the attitudes that Homer, Aeschylus and Euripides had toward the Gods." The two key words are describe and attitude. Remember, description is not judgment. You have not been asked for your opinion. Next, your job is to state what the attitude of the three authors was, not to say whether you agree or disagree. Attitude is not the same as relationship. If you were asked to describe your attitude toward your parents, for instance, and you replied, "We get along pretty well," you would not have answered the question. Your relationship might be quite pleasant but your attitude might range from wholehearted respect to secret scorn.

Essay questions have various requirements. You may be asked to compare, contrast, discuss, criticize, define, explain, prove, evaluate. . . . Each of these verbs has a precise meaning. More important, each of these key “direction” words calls for a certain technique in answering. A list follows:

- Analyze - examine critically to show essential features.
- Criticize - point out strong and weak points (evaluate).
- Compare - show differences and similarities between two or more things.
- Contrast - compare to show differences only.
- Define - give a clear, detailed, and precise meaning (who or what--never when or where).
- Describe - list physical characteristics but often means discuss, explain, identify or give account of.
- Discuss - (comment) - present essentials and their relationships.
- Elaborate - develop theme or idea in greater detail.
- Evaluate - appraise carefully, giving, positive and negative aspects (critique).
- Explain - clarify and interpret details of the problem, theory, etc. Present a step-by-step account of or analysis (how and why).
- Illustrate - explain or clarify by giving clear, pertinent examples (Give examples of).
- List - Set down under each other a series of facts, names, dates, etc. Write a series of numbered items.
- Outline - organize facts by arranging them in a series of headings and subheadings to show relationships.
- Prove - list all logical arguments supporting the statements.
- Summarize - present concisely all main points.

### OTHER TIPS FOR TAKING THE EXAM

1. Answer the easiest question first. This relieves tension and gives you confidence, thus loosening up material from your memory as you proceed.
2. Outline your answer (drawing from Memory Dump) so you are organized and do not ramble.
3. Build each paragraph around one idea.
4. Label or number the parts of your essay.
5. Use the terminology of the course.
6. If you do not know the answer, write something at least.
7. Use a general answer if you do not know the specifics.
8. If time runs out, use the outline and expand upon it as time permits.
9. Reread the question after you have answered it to be sure you have covered it all.
10. If the question seems ambiguous, vague, or too broad, make clear your interpretation of the question before attempting to answer it. Essay questions are sometimes unintentionally, and sometimes intentionally, worded so that they may be interpreted in more than one way, or so that the question must be limited before it can be successfully answered. Part your job with such questions is to limit and restate them tactfully and clearly.

### OTHER HINTS

1. Leave three or so lines between each paragraph so you can add material later if you think of something new.
2. Avoid flippant answers.
3. Never comment on the quality of the exam.
4. Use all the time allowed. Prizes are not awarded to the first person to leave the testing room. Relax and allow your mind to work as leisurely as you can with the time allotted.

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**TWU**  
**Counseling Center**  
**Locations:**

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*West Jones Hall*  
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