

# Improving Your Test-Taking Skills

## ESSAY



## TESTS

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Revised August 2004

### YOUR TASK

Essay exams require you to quickly recall information and be able to organize the information and present the information in a well-organized, well-developed, well-written answer. Your answer to an essay exam question may require one or more words or phrases, one or more sentences, or one or more paragraphs.

Your answer will be graded based upon the quantity, quality, and clarity of the relevant points you present in response to the question. Neatness and correctness of your grammar, spelling, and punctuation can also be factors that affect your grade.

### YOUR PREPARATION

You may be fortunate if your instructor provides you with possible test questions from which to prepare. If not, check the course textbook for end-of-the-chapter review questions that might be useful in your preparation. Look at your course material (i.e., textbook, lecture notes, handouts, supplemental readings) and look at the list of essay exam question words below.

### TYPICAL KEY QUESTION WORDS USED IN ESSAY TEST QUESTIONS

[?] Whatever you will be writing about in the question



When a question uses this word	You need to
Analyze	Divide [?] into separate parts and then write about how these parts relate to other parts and to the whole.
Apply	Write about how you can use [?] or how [?] functions in a given situation.
Compare	Write about how the qualities or characteristics of [?] are the same or similar AND different.
Contrast	Write about how the qualities or characteristics of [?] are different.



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Criticize OR Evaluate	Write your opinion or judgment of [?], giving reasons (pros and cons, advantages and disadvantages, positive and negative views, strengths and weaknesses, worthiness and unworthiness, importance and non-importance) for your approval/agreement or disapproval/disagreement; generally, stress the negative aspects.
Define	Write the concise, authoritative, formal meaning of [?], giving concrete examples, if possible.
Describe	Tell about [?], giving a word picture that characterizes or recounts distinguishing qualities, peculiarities, parts, or key features of people, things, events, etc.
Diagram	Draw a picture of [?] to show the relationship between its parts and label its parts.
Differentiate OR Distinguish	Write about the main differences between [?].
Enumerate Or List	Number and write a series of items about [?], one after another.
Explain OR Discuss	Simplify [?] or clarify with details; offer reasons for or the causes of [?].
Identify	Make known or specify what [?] is.
Illustrate	Make [?] clear with stories, examples, labeled diagrams, or analogies.
Interpret	Translate [?] into simpler form; give your own understanding or opinion of the meaning or significance of [?].
Justify OR Defend OR Support	Present arguments or provide evidence or logical reasons for some point of view, decision, or conclusion about [?]; stress the positive points.
Outline	Present the main and supporting ideas or key characteristics or events about [?] in a concise, organized arrangement.
Propose	Suggest a new idea of your own about [?] with reasons
Prove	Support a conclusion about [?] with examples, facts, statistics, expert opinions, research findings, etc.
Relate	Write about how [?] are connected or associated (how they are alike or how they affect or influence one another).
State	Express clearly and correctly what is asked about [?].
Summarize	Present the main points or facts briefly and any conclusions about [?], tending to omit details.
Trace	Write about the progress, development, logical order, steps or sequence of events of [?] from some specified beginning point to an ending point.

Which question words are applicable to your course material? Is there information that can be defined, compared, explained, illustrated etc.? Use the course material and these question words to help predict possible test questions.

Given a particular question word, what would be the best way to structure the answer? What are the essential main ideas and supporting details? What additional examples, facts, statistics, expert opinion, research findings, etc., would be useful? Look through your textbook

and lecture notes to find and jot down information to help prepare an outline to answer your question.

Write sample responses to your predicted questions using your outline. Check your practice responses by asking yourself the following questions:



A. Completeness, relevance, and accuracy of the content

1. Did I do what the question word asked me to do?
2. Did I answer all parts of the question?
3. Did I include all relevant and essential main ideas and sufficient supporting details?
4. Are all my examples, facts, statistics, expert opinions, and research findings accurate?

B. Organization and clarity of the writing

1. Do the opening sentences of my answer begin with a restatement or rewording of the question and my answer or the main points I will be presenting?
2. Is my answer organized into clearly stated main and supporting points, with each main point presented as a separate paragraph?
3. Did I use transition words to connect or show relationships between ideas both within and between paragraphs?
4. Does my answer end with a brief restatement of the answer or main points?

C. Neatness and correctness of the writing

1. Did I use complete sentences, unless otherwise specified?
2. Is my handwriting neat and legible?
3. Is my spelling correct?
4. Is my punctuation correct?
5. Is my grammar correct?

Have a classmate, friend, or a writing tutor in the University Writing Center, Library Palmer Wing, Room 2097, look at your answer and provide you with comments and suggestions on improving your answer.

To simulate conditions on test day, practice writing without your outline under time constraints.

### YOUR STRATEGY

1. Listen to and/or read the directions carefully and thoroughly.
  - a. Know exactly what you are required to do—that is, how many questions and which questions are you supposed to answer, and how long can the answers be in terms of number of words, paragraphs, or pages? —so that you do only what you need to do.
  - b. Know also how many points each question is worth to help you make a decision about which questions to select and the order in which to answer them.



2. Read the questions carefully.
  - a. Look for and circle the question word in the question—this word will tell you what to do in terms of organizing and presenting your answer. The purpose of essay exam questions is not to have you write down everything you know about the subject but only information that will answer the question. Be sure you understand ahead of time what each of these question words asks you to do.
  - b. Read all parts of the question besides the question word and underline other key words in the question so that you do not leave out any part of the required answer. For example, suppose the question is “Discuss the implications of \_\_\_\_\_ on A and B.” If you discuss only the implications of \_\_\_\_\_ on A and not B, you have not completely answered the question and you will not receive full credit for your answer.
  - c. Jot down key words or ideas if they come to mind while you are reading the question.
3. Decide which questions to answer (if you have a choice).
  - a. By reading all of the questions, identifying and circling the question word, underlining other key words in the question, and jotting down any ideas that come to mind, you can then select the questions you think you can answer best based upon your preparation. Also consider the point value of the questions and their difficulty in making your decisions. You need to try to get the most points in the least amount of time.
4. Plan your time.
  - a. Determine how much time you have and then allot so much time to answer each question to keep you on track so you do not run out of time. Write planned ending times in front of the question.
5. Brainstorm and organize your ideas.
  - a. Jot down any other ideas that come to mind. Then, cluster or make a jot outline to organize the ideas. Use numbers for the main ideas and letters for the supporting ideas to show relationships between main ideas and supporting ideas and to indicate the order of presentation.
  - b. Check off the ideas as you use them in your answer.
6. Write the essay while being aware of your time.
  - a. If writing on blank sheets of lined paper or in a Blue Book, are sure to number the answer to correspond to the question number.
  - b. If writing on loose sheets of paper, be sure to write your name, course, and date on each sheet and number the sheets (you might number four pages as 1 of 4, 2 of 4, 3 of 4, and 4 of 4).
  - c. Write legibly using a pen (can be easier to read). Print if your handwriting is not legible. Illegible writing can be very irritating to the grader who may decide not to spend as much time trying to decipher your words.
  - d. Begin by rewording and restating the question so as to allow you to include your answer in the opening sentences or opening paragraph.

- e. If you make a mistake, just draw a single dark line through what you wrote for the sake of neatness and time.
  - f. Write only on one side of a sheet. This eliminates the problem of the ink “bleeding” through making the pages difficult to read because of overlapping writing. The blank backside can also be useful to add information you may have missed initially or to rewrite something that may not have been clear.
  - g. Leave space between paragraphs both for ease of reading but also to add information. Remember also that you have the blank backside to do this.
  - h. If you are writing out of time and unable to finish, outline your response. You may be given some partial credit for your ideas.
7. Proofread the answer.
- a. Remember to allow time to check to see if you answered the question correctly and completely, included and clearly organized relevant and essential main and supporting ideas, wrote legibly, and used correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

### AFTER THE TEST

1. If you did well, congratulate yourself and prepare and take the next test in the same manner.
2. If you need or wish to improve for the next test, check how well you predicted the test questions?
  - a. Check where the questions came from (on what material were the questions based) and the types of questions asked (what question words were used).
  - b. Reread the Preparation section above and assess actual your preparation.
3. Talk with your instructor. Ask to read an “A” paper and for suggestions on what you can do better prepare and write your answers.

