

Writing Essay Exams

This resource outlines strategies you can take to make essay exam questions easier to navigate through a series of questions you can learn to ask yourself as you take an essay exam.

How do I start?

Read through the entire examination.

Make any quick notes in the margins about answers using the strategies below.

How do I budget my time?

Divide your time into blocks.

After reading the exam, determine the total time allotted for the exam, the total number of questions and the point value of each question if there are multiple questions. Incorporate allocations of time spent on each question on the point value of the answers. Make sure to incorporate a planning period at the beginning and a review period at the end

How can I better understand the question?

Circle or underline several of the key words or phrases.

This simplifies the question by eliminating distracting information that makes the question seem longer and more complex.

Key words to mark include:

- the words which give instructions about what to do (for example: *describe, explain, analyze, compare, discuss*)
- the key terms used (for example: *factor, principle, reason, issue*, and other important vocabulary words that are part of the course itself)

How do I decide what to write?

Make a quick list of your ideas.

A list helps you get started, helps you keep those ideas coming, and helps you keep from forgetting what you have to say.

Use the back of the test page, the top of the paper, the margin. Jot down the key ideas that you think could go into an essay. Making this list helps you do several things:

- First, it helps you to put some basic ideas on paper, you don't have to work so hard to remember it anymore. It's like making a grocery list before you go shopping, which helps you remember what you went to the store for.
- Second, it helps you organize your thoughts so you can decide on a logical order for the ideas. After you start writing, you can always change the order again, or even add to the list as more ideas come to mind because the act of writing itself helps stimulate your mind to come up with more ideas. In fact, you will probably forget good ideas that pop into your mind as you are writing unless you quickly add them to your list.

How do I start my answer?

Start writing by making your first sentence a restatement of the question.

This helps you get started without having to think too hard about how to start your answer. It also gets your pen moving without too much effort, which often is all you need to get going, and to get ideas started.

e.g. What are some of the positives and some of the negatives experienced by commuters who make the switch from driving a car to using public transit?

Possible First Sentence for an answer:

Commuters experience both positive and negative outcomes when they switch from driving to using public transit.

What if I can't think of enough to write about?

Try a formulaic solution, with this 4-step pattern.

1. Make a general statement or point.
One benefit of switching to public transit is time to relax while leaving the stress of driving to the bus driver.
2. Explain the statement in more words, with specific details, or give some background context.
Driving during rush hour causes a great deal of stress as the driver tries to feed into congested roads, think ahead about how and when to get into a different lane to be ready for the next turn while listening to the traffic report to hear which bridge to avoid today.
3. Provide evidence-specific details, examples, or expert opinion (quotations) as evidence of your point.
Many commuters on trains or buses can be observed catching up on their reading, doing crosswords, reading newspapers, chatting with friends. On the other hand, drivers in rush hour tend to be alone, with a foot on the brake or accelerator, their hands on the steering wheel, waiting impatiently for a light to change or the car in front to move more quickly.
4. Explain your evidence – show how your example or evidence demonstrates the point you started with.
Riding on buses or trains provides opportunities to relax whereas driving a car in rush hour requires concentration, attention to details of navigating, and readiness to respond quickly, all of which are hardly relaxing.

How should I review my answers?

Reread both the question and your answer.

When you are done writing, go back and review the instructions and make sure you are incorporating necessary information to fulfill the assignment. Take a few minutes to reread and review your writing. Incorporate any information you think of while you are reading that will strengthen your answer. You can also use your quick list from your planning stage as a checklist to see if you have captured everything you intended to write.