

A GUIDE TO TAKING ESSAY EXAMS

Do you have an upcoming essay exam and no idea how to prepare? This guide will equip you with what you need to successfully study for and complete an essay exam!

Though essay exams may seem intimidating, they aren't too different from any other essay you may write for your classes!

BEFORE THE ESSAY EXAM

1. **Stay on top of your course readings.** Keeping up with the assigned readings will prevent you from cramming right before the exam.
2. **Attend your course lectures.** Your professor's lectures will teach you about the key ideas and concepts of the class. Pay attention to the concepts discussed most prominently or passionately.
3. **Take notes.** Taking careful notes on both your course readings and lectures will provide you with plenty of content to study before the exam.
4. **Practice with sample essay questions.** If you don't know what essay questions will appear on the exam, create your own essay questions based on the key themes and concepts of the class. Practice responding to those questions based on material from your course readings and lectures.

DURING THE ESSAY EXAM

1. **Budget your time.** Whether your exam includes one large essay or several mini essays, you should manage your time to account for planning, writing, and reviewing your answer(s).
2. **Read the essay question(s) carefully.** As you read your essay question(s), keep an eye out for key terms that indicate how you should frame your answers.
 - "Compare / Contrast" – write about the similarities / differences between events, ideas, or people.
 - "Describe" – list the important characteristics of an event, idea, or person.
 - "Evaluate" – write about the strengths and weaknesses of a topic.
 - "Explain" – clarify a topic by describing its relevant features.
 - "Identify" – target the key points relevant to a topic.
 - "Justify" – prove why a particular view or idea is correct.
 - "Summarize" – provide a concise overview that includes only the most significant elements of a topic.
 - "Trace" – show how an event or idea developed over time.
3. **Create an outline.** After reading an essay question, jot down a quick outline to structure your response.

- **Write a thesis statement.** A thesis statement makes a claim and summarizes the main ideas supporting that claim. To learn more about thesis statements, see [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#) of our Thesis Statement Guides.
 - **List the main points of your body paragraphs.** Your essay response should include two to three body paragraphs that explain the main points listed in your thesis statement.
4. **Write your essay using proper mechanics.** Don't forget the importance of proper spelling, grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure!
 5. **Proofread your essay once you have finished it.** Reserve a few minutes to read through your essay, evaluate your grammar and organization, and correct any errors.

AFTER THE ESSAY EXAM

Celebrate! If you prepared diligently and gave your best effort, you deserve to celebrate after your essay exam!

PRACTICE NOW