

How to Write a Good Answer to Exam Essay Questions



Answering essay questions on an exam can be difficult and stressful, which can make it hard to provide a good answer. However, you can improve your ability to answer essay questions by learning how to understand the questions, form an answer, and stay focused. Developing your ability to give excellent answers on essay exams will take time and effort, but you can learn some good essay question practices and start improving your answers.

Part 1 – UNDERSTANDING THE QUESTION

Read the question carefully. Before you get started, make sure that you have read the essay question twice and that you understand what you need to do. Underline or highlight the most important words or phrases in the question to help you stay focused on answering the question.

Identify the key words. Teachers and professors use certain key words in essay questions to communicate what they want you to do. For example, an essay question that asks you to “describe” an issue will be different from an essay question that asks you to “argue” a position. Make sure that you identify the key word in each essay question you read. Some of the most common key words include:^[2]

- Analyze: Explain the what, where, who, when, why, and how. Include pros and cons, strengths and weaknesses, etc.
- Compare: Discuss the similarities and differences between two or more things. Don't forget to explain why the comparison is useful.
- Contrast: Discuss how two or more things are different or distinguish between them. Don't forget to explain why the contrast is useful.
- Define: State what something means, does, achieves, etc.

- Describe: List characteristics or traits of something. You may also need to summarize something, such as an essay prompt that asks "Describe the major events that led to the American Revolution."
- Discuss: This is more analytical. You usually begin by describing something and then present arguments for or against it. You may need to analyze the advantages or disadvantages of your subject.
- Evaluate: Offer the pros and cons, positives and negatives for a subject. You may be asked to evaluate a statement for logical support, or evaluate an argument for weaknesses.
- Explain: Explain why or how something happened, or justify your position on something.
- Prove: Usually reserved for more scientific or objective essays. You may be asked to include evidence and research to build a case for a specific position or set of hypotheses.
- Summarize: Usually, this means to list the major ideas or themes of a subject. It could also ask you to present the main ideas in order to then fully discuss them. Most essay questions will not ask for pure summary without anything else.

Ask questions if anything is unclear. If you do not understand what the question is asking or if you are unsure about the meaning of the key word, ask your teacher or professor. Do not attempt to answer the question until you fully understand what you are supposed to do. Otherwise, you may end up providing an incorrect answer.^[3]

- Raise your hand and wait for your teacher to come over to you or approach your teacher's desk to ask your question. This way you will be less likely to disrupt other test takers.

Part 2 – FORMING YOUR RESPONSE

Follow the instructions. Use the instructions to determine what to include in your answer. Follow them to the letter and do not improvise or include non-essential information. Professors cite not following the instructions as a main reason why some students do not do well on essay questions.^[4]



Think about how you should structure your answer. The organization of your answer is important. If the question suggests a specific order for your answer, then your answer should follow that structure.^[5]

- Take a moment to consider your organization before you start writing your answer. What information should come first, second, third, etc.?

Choose relevant facts and figures to include. A strong essay question answer should provide a relevant answer while also displaying your knowledge of a subject. Take some time to consider the best way to accomplish this goal with the relevant facts and figures you have learned about in your studies.^[6]

- You may want to make a list of facts and figures that you want to include in your essay answer. That way you can refer to this list as you write your answer.
- It's best to write down all the important key topics or ideas before you get started composing your answer. That way, you can check back to make sure you haven't missed anything.^[7]

Begin your answer by rephrasing the essay question as a statement. The best way to start an essay answer is to rephrase the question in the form of a statement. Opening your essay in this way signals to the professor that you have read and understood the question. Rephrasing the question also helps you to stay focused on providing an answer to that question right from the start.^[8]

- For example, imagine that your essay question asks: "Should the FIFA World Cup be awarded to countries with human rights violations? Explain and support your answer."
- You might restate this as "Countries with human rights violations should not be awarded the FIFA World Cup because this rewards a nation's poor treatment of its citizens." This will be the thesis that you support with examples and explanation.

Make sure that your answer has a clear point. Even in a compare/contrast situation, you will need to be very clear what your essay is arguing.^[9]

- For example, whether you argue that the FIFA World Cup should or should not be awarded to countries with human rights violations, you will want to address the opposing side's argument. However, it needs to be clear where your essay stands about the matter.
- Often, essay questions end up saying things along the lines of "There are many similarities and differences between X and Y." This does not offer a clear position and can result in a bad grade.

Pay attention to your grammar and punctuation. Poor grammar and punctuation can affect your grade on an essay question. Try to use correct grammar and punctuation as you write because you may not have time to go back and proofread your work. If you end up with a few minutes to spare, go back and proofread what you have written.^[10]

- If you are required to write your answer by hand, then take care to make your writing legible and neat. Some professors may deduct points if they cannot read what you have written.

Part 3 – STAYING CALM AND FOCUSED

Stop and take a deep breath if you get too anxious. It is crucial to stay calm when you are taking an essay exam. If you get flustered, you may have trouble recalling important information or you may make simple mistakes.



- If you get to a point during the exam where you feel too anxious to focus, put down your pencil (or take your hands off of the keyboard), close your eyes, and take a deep breath. Stretch your arms and imagine that you are somewhere pleasant for a few moments. When you have completed this brief exercise, open up your eyes and resume the exam.^[11]

Use your time wisely. Some exams may suggest how much time you should spend on each question or even give you a time limit for each question. Having

suggestions and limits like these may help you to budget your time. If your exam does not provide a guide for how much time to spend on each question, develop your own time budget at the beginning of the exam.^[12]

- For example, if the exam period is one hour long and you have to answer three questions in that time frame, then you should plan to spend no more than 20 minutes on each question.
- Look at the weight of the questions, if applicable. For example, if there are five 10-point short-answers and a 50-point essay, plan to spend more time on the essay because it is worth significantly more. Don't get stuck spending so much time on the short-answers that you don't have time to develop a complex essay.

Write as quickly as you can. While you do not want to write so fast that you are not thinking about your answers, remember that you are on the clock. Consider the question and plan your answers well, but then try to write your answers as quickly as you can.^[13]

- This strategy is even more important if the exam has multiple essay questions. If you take too much time on the first question, then you may not have enough time to answer the other questions on the exam.

Stay on topic. While it is okay to let your mind wander a bit when you are writing a formal essay, you need to stay focused on the question when you write an essay exam response. Otherwise, you may end up providing unnecessary information and losing points for not including the information that was required.^[14]

- If you feel like you are straying away from the question, reread the question and review any notes that you made to help guide you. After you get refocused, then continue writing your answer.
- Try to allow yourself enough time to go back and tighten up connections between your points. A few well-placed transitions can really bump up your grade.