

Tips for In-Class Essay Exams

1. Preparation

If you know what the question(s) will be before the exam:

- Review all relevant readings again. Add to your notes if needed.
- Create a visual to answer each question, such as a brainstorming chart or mind map.
- Create an outline of your essay.
- Practice writing your answer(s)!

If you don't know what the question(s) will be before the exam:

- Make sure you have read and annotated all readings.
- Think back to what your professor emphasized during lecture and discussions.
- Consider the “big picture” of the class
 - Review student learning outcomes.
 - Use a chart to lump material for the exam into themes.
- Use textbook end of chapter review questions as practice.

2. Once You Have the Questions

Before you begin writing:

- Look at how many points each question is weighted. Questions worth more points should be prioritized and need to be longer.
- Determine how much time you will spend writing each answer/section.
- Understand what the question is asking you to do by looking for action words. See examples on the next page.
- Plan your answers before actually writing. This could include jotting a few key terms/concepts for short answers or an outline for longer answers.


While writing:

- Consider “double-spacing” so you can easily add information later.
- Be direct and specific about what you want to say.
- If you are short on time, try to outline remaining information you planned to discuss.


3. When You Finish

- Schedule or use remaining time to proofread. Not only can you find errors but you can also make any changes/additions you need.


Action Words for Essays

 *Information* words ask you to demonstrate what you know about the subject. Examples:

- explain why/how—give reasons why or examples of how something happened.
 - summarize—briefly cover the important ideas you learned about the subject.
 - trace—describe how something has changed or developed from an earlier time to its current form.
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 *Relation* words ask you to demonstrate how things are connected. Examples:

- apply—use details that you’ve been given to demonstrate how an idea, theory, or concept works in a particular situation.
 - cause—show how one event or series of events made something else happen.
 - relate—show or describe the connections between things.
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 *Interpretation* words ask you to defend ideas of your own about the subject. Don’t see these words as requesting opinion alone (unless the assignment specifically says so), but as requiring opinion that is supported by evidence from course materials. Examples:

- prove, justify—give reasons or examples to demonstrate how or why something is the truth.
- evaluate, respond, assess—state your opinion of the subject as good, bad, or some combination of the two, with examples and reasons.
- support—give reasons or evidence for something you believe (be sure to state clearly what it is that you believe).
- synthesize—put two or more things together that haven’t been put together before; don’t just summarize one and then the other, and say that they are similar or different—you must clearly explain how the two come together.
- analyze—look closely at the components of something to figure out how it works, what it might mean, or why it is important.
- argue—take a side and defend it (with proof) against the other side.