

Writing Exam Essays

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You may never consider **exam essays** fun, but once you develop the knack, writing an essay as part of an exam can be as much of a learning experience as writing an essay or report out of class. There are differences, of course. At home, you can “hatch” your essay over several hours, days, or even weeks; you can write and rewrite; you can produce an impressively typed final copy.

Exam essays, though, are different. Time pressure is the name of the game. If you have trouble writing essays at home, the idea of preparing one in a test situation may throw you into a kind of panic. How, you may wonder, can you show what you know in such a short time? Indeed, you may feel that such tests are designed to show you at your worst.

Befuddling students and causing anxiety are not, however, the goals that instructors have in mind when they prepare essay exams. Instructors intend such exams to reveal your understanding of the subject—and to stimulate you to interpret course material in perceptive, new ways. They realize that the writing done under time pressure won’t result in a masterpiece; such writing may include misspellings and awkward sentences. However, they *do* expect reasonably

complete essay answers: no brief outlines, no rambling lists of unconnected points. Focused, developed, coherent responses are what instructors are looking for. Such expectations are not as unrealistic as they may first seem when you realize that all the writing techniques discussed in this book are applicable to taking essay tests.

THREE FORMS OF WRITTEN ANSWERS

There are three general types of questions that require written answers—some as short as one or two sentences, others as long as a full, several-paragraph essay.

Short Answers

One kind of question calls for a **short answer** of only a few sentences. Always read the instructions carefully to determine exactly what's expected. Such questions often ask you to identify (or define) a term *and* explain its importance. An instructor may give full credit only if you answer *both* parts of the question. Also, unless the directions indicate that fragmentary responses are acceptable, be prepared to write one to three full sentences.

Here are several examples of short answers for an exam in modern art history.

Directions: Identify and explain the significance of the following:

1. *Composition with Red, Yellow, and Blue*, 1921: Like most of Piet Mondrian's "compositions," this painting consists of horizontal and vertical lines and the primary colors, red, yellow, and blue. The painting also shows Matisse's influence on Mondrian since Matisse believed that art should express a person's spirit through pure form and color rather than depict real objects or scenes.
2. "Concerning the Spiritual in Art": This is an essay written by Wassily Kandinsky in 1912 to justify the abstract painting style he used. Showing Matisse's influence, the essay maintains that pure forms and basic colors convey reality more accurately than true-to-life depictions.
3. The Eiffel Tower Series: Done around 1910 by Robert Delaunay, this is a series of paintings having the Eiffel Tower as subject. Delaunay used a cubist approach, analyzing surface, space, and interesting planes.

Paragraph-Length Answers

Questions requiring a **paragraph-length answer** may signal—directly or indirectly—the length of response expected. For example, such questions may indicate "answer in a few sentences," or they may be followed by a paragraph-sized space on the answer sheet. In any case, a successful answer should address the question as completely yet as concisely as possible. Beginning with a strong topic sentence will help you focus your response.

Following is a paragraph-length answer to a question on a political science exam:

Directions: Discuss the meaning of the term *interest group* and comment briefly on the role such groups play in the governing of democratic societies.

An interest group is an “informal” type of political organization; its goal is to influence government policy and see legislation enacted that favors its members. An interest group differs from a political party; the interest group doesn’t want to control the government or have an actual share in governing (the whole purpose of a political party). Interest groups are considered “informal” because they are not officially part of the governing process. Still, they exert tremendous power. Democratic governments constantly respond to interest groups by passing new laws and policies. Some examples of interest groups are institutions (the military, the Catholic Church), associations (the American Medical Association, Mothers Against Drunk Driving), and nonassociational groups (car owners, television viewers).

Essay-Length Answers

You will frequently be asked to write an **essay-length answer** as part of a longer examination. Occasionally, an exam may consist of a single essay, as in a “test-out” exam at the end of a writing course.

Here is a typical essay question from an exam in an introductory course in linguistics. A response to this question can be found on pages 663–664.

Account for the differences in American and British English by describing at least three major influences that affected the way this country’s settlers spoke English. Give as many examples as you can of words derived from these influences.

The rest of this chapter discusses the features of a strong essay response and shows how the writing process can be adapted to a test-taking situation.

HOW TO PREPARE FOR EXAM ESSAYS

Being able to write a good exam essay is the result of a certain type of studying. There are times when cramming is probably unavoidable, but you should try to avoid this last-minute crunch whenever possible. It prevents you from gaining a clear overview of a course and a real understanding of a course’s main issues.

In contrast, spaced study throughout the semester gives you a sense of the *whys* of the subject, not just the *who, what, where, and when*.

As you prepare for an exam essay, you should try to follow the guidelines listed in the checklist below.



PREPARING FOR AN EXAM ESSAY: A CHECKLIST

- In light of the main concepts covered in the course, identify key issues that the exam might logically address.
- With these issues in mind, design several exam essay questions.
- Draft an answer for each anticipated question.
- Commit to memory any facts, quotations, data, lists of reasons, and so forth that you would include in your answers.

Although you may not anticipate the exam's actual questions, preparing some questions and answers can give you practice analyzing and working with the course material. In the process, you'll probably allay some pre-exam jitters as well.

AT THE EXAMINATION

Survey the Entire Test

Look over the entire written-answer section of a test before working on any part of it. Note which sections are worth the highest point value and plan to spend the longest time on those sections. Follow any guidelines that the directions may provide about the length of the response. When "a brief paragraph" is all that is required, don't launch into a full-scale essay.

If you're given a choice about which exam questions to answer, read them all before choosing. Of course, select those you feel best equipped to answer. If it's a toss-up between two, you might quickly sketch out answers to both (see page 660) before deciding which to do. To avoid mistakes, circle questions you plan to answer and cross out those you'll skip. Then give yourself a time limit for writing each response and, within reason, stick with your plan.

Understand the Essay Question

Once you've selected the question on which you're going to write, you need to make sure you know what the question is looking for. Examine the question carefully to determine its slant or emphasis. Most essay questions ask you

to focus on a specific issue or to bring together material from different parts of a course.

Many questions use **key directional words** that suggest an answer developed according to a particular pattern of development. Here are some key directional words and the patterns they suggest:



Key Directional Words	Pattern of Development
Provide details about . . .	} Description
Give the history of . . .	} Narration
Trace the development of . . .	
Explain . . .	} Illustration
List . . .	
Provide examples of . . .	
Analyze the parts of . . .	} Division-classification
Discuss the types of . . .	
Analyze . . .	} Process analysis
Explain how . . .	
Show how . . .	
Discuss advantages and disadvantages of . . .	} Comparison-contrast
Show similarities and differences between . . .	
Account for . . .	} Cause-effect
Analyze . . .	
Discuss the consequences of . . .	
Explain the reasons for . . .	
Explain why . . .	
Show the influence of . . .	
Clarify . . .	} Definition
Explain the meaning of . . .	
Identify . . .	
Argue . . .	} Argumentation-persuasion
Defend . . .	
Evaluate . . .	
Justify . . .	
Show the failings or merits of . . .	
Support . . .	

The following sample questions show the way key directional words imply the approach to take. In each example, the key words are italicized. Note that some essay questions call for two or more patterns of development. The key terms

could, for example, indicate that you should *contrast* two things before *arguing* the merits of one.

1. Galileo, now recognized as having made valuable contributions to our understanding of the universe, was twice tried by the Vatican. *Explain the factors* that *caused* the church and the astronomer to fall into what one historian has termed a “fatal collision of opposite philosophies.” [Cause-effect]
2. *Define* the superego and *explain how*, according to Freud, the superego develops. [Definition; process analysis]
3. *Explain the difference* between “educational objectives” and “instructional objectives.” *Provide specific examples* of each, focusing on the distinction between students’ immediate and long-term needs. [Comparison-contrast; illustration]

WRITE THE ESSAY

The steps in the writing process are the same, whether you compose an essay at home or prepare an essay response in a classroom test situation. The main difference is that during a test the process is streamlined. Following are some helpful guidelines for handling each writing stage when you prepare an essay as part of an exam.

Prewrite

Prewriting begins when you analyze the essay question and determine your essay’s basic approach (see pages 658–659). We suggest that you do your analysis of the question on the exam sheet: Underline key directional terms, circle other crucial words, and put numbers next to points that the question indicates you should cover.

Then, still using your exam page or a piece of scratch paper, make notes for an answer. (Writing on the exam sheet means you won’t have several pieces of paper to keep track of.) Jot down main points as well as facts and examples. If you feel blocked, try brainstorming, freewriting, mapping, or another prewriting technique (see pages 25–30) to get yourself going.

What to Avoid. Don’t get overinvolved in the prewriting stage; you won’t have time to generate pages of notes. Try using words and phrases, not full sentences or paragraphs. Also, don’t spend time analyzing your audience (you know it’s your instructor) or choosing a tone (exams obviously require a serious, analytic approach).

Identify Your Thesis

Like essays written at home, exam essays should have a **thesis**. Often, the thesis is a statement answering the exam question. For example, in response to a question asking you to “Discuss the origins of apartheid,” your thesis might begin, “The South African law of ‘separateness,’ or apartheid, originated in 1948,

a result of a series of factors that. . . .” Similarly, the essay answer to a question asking you to “Discuss the process by which nations are admitted to the European Community” might start, “Nations are admitted to the European Community through the process of. . . .” Note that these thesis statements are somewhat informal. They state the *subject* of the essay but *not* the writer’s *attitude* toward the subject. In a test-taking situation, these less-structured thesis statements are perfectly acceptable. (For more on thesis statements, see Chapter 3.)

Support the Thesis with Evidence

In the prewriting stage, you jotted down material needed to answer the question. At this point, you should review the **evidence** quickly to make sure it’s *adequate*. Does it provide sufficient support for your thesis? If not, make some additional quick notes. Also, check that support for your thesis is *unified*, *specific*, *accurate*, and *representative* (see pages 47–52 and 70–75).

Organize the Evidence

Before you start writing, devise some kind of **outline**. You may simply sequence your prewriting jottings by placing numbers or letters beside them. Or you can quickly translate the jottings into a brief, informal outline.

However you proceed, go back and review the essay question one more time. If the question has two or three parts, your outline should tackle each one in turn. Suppose a question asks you to “Consider the effects of oil spills on wildlife, ocean ecology, and oil reserves.” Your answer should address each of these three areas, with separate paragraphs for each area.

Also, focus again on the question’s key *directional words*. If the question asks you to discuss similarities and differences, your outline should draw on one of the two basic *comparison-contrast* formats (see pages 349–354). Since many exam questions call for more than one task (for example, you may be asked both to *define* a theory and to *argue* its merits), you should make sure your outline reflects the appropriate patterns of development.

Many outlines use an *emphatic* approach to organize material (“Discuss which factors are most critical in determining whether a wildlife species will become extinct”). However, when discussing historical or developmental issues (for example, in psychology), you often structure material *chronologically*. In some fields (art history is one) you may choose a *spatial* approach—for instance, if you describe a work of art. Quickly assess the situation to determine which approach would work best, and keep it in mind as you sequence the points in your outline. (Turn to pages 58–61 and 55–58 for more on, respectively, outlining and emphatic, chronological, spatial, and simple-to-complex plans.)

What to Avoid. Don’t prepare a formal or many-leveled outline; you’ll waste valuable time. A phrase outline with two levels of support should be sufficient in most cases.



Write the Draft

Generally, you won't have time to write a formal introduction, so it's fine to begin the essay with your thesis, perhaps followed by a plan of development (see pages 39–40). Write as many paragraphs as you need to show you have command of the concepts and facts taught in the course. Refer to your outline as you write, but, if inspiration strikes, feel free to add material or deal with a point in a different order.

As you draft your response, you may want to write on every other line or leave several blank spaces at the bottom of the page. That way, you can easily slot in any changes you need to make along the way. Indeed, you shouldn't feel hesitant about crossing out material—a quotation you didn't get quite right, a sentence that reads awkwardly, a fact that should be placed elsewhere. *Do* make these changes, but make them neatly.

When preparing the draft, remember that you'll be graded in part on how *specific*, *accurate*, and *representative* your evidence is (see pages 49–51 and 71–75). Provide concrete, correct, true-to-type evidence. Make sure, too, that your response is *unified* (see pages 48–49 and 70–71). Don't include interesting but basically irrelevant information. Stay focused on the question. Using topic sentences to structure your paragraphs will help you stay on track.

Your instructor will need transitions and other markers to understand fully how your points connect to one another. Try to show how your ideas relate by using *signal devices*, such as *first*, *second*, *however*, *for instance*, and *most important* (see pages 76–77).

As you near the end of the essay, check the original question. Have you covered everything? Does the question call for a final judgment or evaluative comment? If so, provide it. Also, if you have time, you may want to close with a brief, one- or two-sentence summary.

What to Avoid. Don't write your essay on scrap paper and plan to recopy. You probably won't have enough time. Even if you do, you may, in your haste, leave out words, phrases, or whole sentences. Your first and only draft should be the one written on the exam booklet or paper. Also, unless your instructor specifically requests it, don't waste time recopying the question in your exam booklet.

Instructors find it easier to evaluate what you know if you've used paragraphs. Don't, then, cast your answer as one long paragraph spanning three pages. If you've outlined your ideas, you'll have a clear idea where paragraph breaks should occur. Finally, don't cram your response with everything you know about the subject. Most instructors can detect padded answers in a second. Give focused, intelligent responses, not one rambling paragraph after another.

Revise, Edit, and Proofread

If you've budgeted your time, you should have a few minutes left to review your essay answer. (Don't skip rereading it just so you can leave the room a few minutes early.) Above all, read your response to be sure it answers the question fully. Make any changes that will improve the answer—perhaps add a fact, correct a quotation, tighten a sentence. If you want to add a whole sentence or more, write the material

in some nearby blank space and use an arrow to show where it goes. If something is in the wrong place, use an arrow and a brief note to indicate where it should go.

Instructors will accept insertions and deletions—as long as such changes are made with consideration for their sanity. Use a few bold strokes, not wild spidery scribbles, to cross out text. Use the standard editing marks such as the caret (see page 143) to indicate additions and other changes.

As you reread, check grammar and spelling. Obvious grammatical errors and spelling mistakes—especially if they involve the subject’s key terms—may affect your grade. If spelling is a problem for you, request permission to have your dictionary at hand.

Sample Essay Answer

The essay that follows was written by Andrew Kahan in response to this take-home exam question:

Account for the differences in American and British English by describing at least three major influences that affected the way this country’s settlers spoke English. Give as many examples as you can of words derived from these influences.

Andrew started by underlining the question’s key words. Then he listed in the margin the main points and some of the supporting evidence he planned to include in his answer. That done, he formulated a thesis and began writing his essay. The handwritten annotations reflect the changes Andrew made when he refined his answer before handing in his exam.

American English diverged from British English because those who settled the New World had contact with people that those back in England generally did not. As a result of ^{this} contact, several pidgin languages developed. A pidgin language, which has its own grammar and vocabulary, comes about when the speakers of two or more unrelated languages communicate ~~for a while~~ over a period of time. Maritime pidgin, African pidgin, and Indian pidgin were three influences that helped shape American English.

By the time the New World began to be settled, sailors and sea merchants of ^{all} the European nations had traveled widely. A maritime pidgin thus ~~immersed~~ emerged that enabled diverse groups to communicate.* Since Portugal controlled the seas around the time the colonies were settled, maritime pidgin was largely influenced by the Portuguese. Such Portuguese-derived words as “cavort,” “palaver,” and “savvy” first entered American English in this way.

- ① Maritime pidgin (Portug. influ.)
- ② African pidgin (Slaves comm. with each other and with owners)
- ③ Native American pidgin (words for native plants and animals)

*and trade with each other

The New World's trade with Africa also ~~effec~~ affected American English. The slave trade, in particular, took American sailors and merchants all over the African continent. Since the traders mixed up slaves of many tribes to prevent them from becoming unified, the Africans had to rely on ^{their own} pidgin to communicate with each other. Moreover, slave owners relied on this African-based pidgin to communicate with their slaves.** Since slaves tended to be settled in the heavily populated American coastal areas, elements of the African pidgin readily worked their way into the language of the New World. Words and phrases derived from African pidgins include "caboodle" and "kick the bucket." Other African-based words include "buckaroo" and "goobers," plus words known only in the Deep South, like "cooter" for turtle. African-based slang terms and constructions ("uptight," "put-on," and "hip," meaning "cool" or "in") continue to enter mainstream English from black English even today.

Another ^{important} influence on American English, in the nation's early days, was contact with Native American culture. As settlers moved inland from coastal areas, they confronted Native Americans, and new pidgins grew up, melding English and Native American terms. Native American words like "squaw," "tomahawk," and "papoose" entered English. Also, many words for Native American plants and animals have Native American roots: "squash," "raccoon," and "skunk" are just a few. Another possible effect of Native American languages on American English may be the tendency to form noun-noun compounds ("apple butter" and "shade tree"). While such constructions do occur in British English, they are ^{much} more frequent in American English.

British and American English differ because the latter has been shaped by contact with European languages like Portuguese, as well as by contact with non-European languages--especially those spoken by Africans and Native Americans.

**until they mastered English.

Commentary

Alert to such phrases as *account for* and *influences that affected* in the question, Andrew wrote an essay that describes three *causes* for the divergence of American from British English. The three causes are organized roughly chronologically,

beginning with the influence of maritime exploration, moving to the effect of contact with African culture, and concluding with the influence of Native Americans.

Although the essay is developed mainly through a decision of causes, other patterns of development come into play. The first paragraph *defines* the term *pidgin*, while the second, third, and fourth paragraphs draw on *process analysis*; they describe how pidgins developed, as well as how they affected the language spoken by early settlers. Finally, the essay includes numerous *examples*, as the exam question requested. Andrew's response shows a solid knowledge of the material taught in the course and demonstrates his ability to organize the material into a clear, coherent statement.



ACTIVITY: WRITING EXAM ESSAYS



In preparation for an exam with essay questions, devise four possible essay questions on the material in one of your courses. For each, do some quick prewriting, determine a thesis, and jot down an outline. Then, for one of the questions, write a full essay answer, giving yourself a time limit of fifteen to twenty-five minutes, whatever is appropriate for the question. Don't forget to edit and proofread your answer.

For additional writing, reading, and research resources, go to www.mycomplab.com and choose Nadell/Langan/Comodromos' *The Longman Writer*, 7/e.