



## **Writing Essay Exams** (In-Class and Take-Home)

### **The Essay Exam**

The essay exam is one of the most common forms of college writing. Typically, you might be asked to:

- ! evaluate a quotation in light of what you have studied.
- ! analyze and assess the significance of a particular policy or event.
- ! choose between two conflicting assessments of an event or theory.
- ! write about a particular theme in several works of fiction.

In every case, you must use specific examples drawn from the lectures and assigned readings.

\*\*The point of this assignment is not merely to provide a summary of facts or a chronology of events, but to make an argument which is supported by evidence drawn from the course materials.\*\*

### **Its Purpose**

An essay exam gives you an opportunity to demonstrate your ability to:

- ! think critically about the themes and materials of the course.
- ! make your own assessment of those themes and conflicting interpretations of them.
- ! support your assessment using evidence from the texts, lectures, and precept discussion.
- ! show how well you are able to connect the various materials of the course to the central themes of the course, and to each other.

### **How to Begin**

#### **I. The Assignment**

**Before you do anything else, make sure you understand the assignment.**

- ! Are there terms you don't understand?
- ! If you must respond to a quotation or to conflicting statements by different scholars, do you understand what the quotation or quotations mean? To what event, time period, or issue does the quotation pertain? What do you know about the person(s) being quoted?
- ! If you are taking a position in a scholarly debate, do you understand all sides of the issue?
- ! Ask questions before you begin writing, and make sure you choose the question(s) you are best prepared to answer.

#### **II. Preparation**

**For take-home exams:**

(In general, prepare more and write less!)

1. Read the question through several times, and make a list of each component of the question that your essay will need to address.

2. Make a list of any terms or concepts in the exam question that you don't understand. Write definitions for them in your own words, using the surrounding context of the book or article and a dictionary to help you.
3. Use the indexes of the course texts and your reading and lecture notes to help you locate the key supporting evidence you need to respond to the exam question. Make a list of all the key points that relate to the exam question, noting the source and page number(s) as you go.
4. Note when sources disagree in their interpretation of the evidence. How do you decide which analysis is most convincing?

**For in-class exams:**

1. Make a list of any terms or concepts in the course readings you don't understand. Write definitions for them in your own words, using the surrounding context of the book or article and a dictionary to help you.
2. As you read, make a list of key points comprising the author's argument, again in your own words.
3. Think about the author's argument in relation to the other authors you have read. On which points do more than one author agree? On which do they differ? What kinds of evidence does each author use?
4. Look for themes that come up in more than one text or are repeated in more than one lectureXthese will certainly be the issues that will be emphasized in the exam question(s).

**III. Approaching the Question**

You can make choices about how you respond to essay exam questions. While you must incorporate every part of the question in your response, here are some ways to limit the scope of your essay:

- ! ComparisonsXIf you are asked to compare two works of literature or two policy proposals, or two interpretations of the Cold War, choose one or two themes or issues that illustrate the comparison and build your argument around them.
- ! Analyzing ThemesXIf you are asked to discuss a theme or issue that the course emphasized, limit your response to three of the stories you've read that illustrate the theme, or three of the philosophers you've studied who take different positions on the theme, or three of the countries you've studied where the issue is important.
- ! Controlling the TermsXTake control of the terms and concepts you will use in your essay by defining them clearly and explaining the specific aspects of these concepts that you will focus on. You cannot explore all of the complexities of "democracy," or "feminism," or "segregation," in 5 pages. Showing your reader that you realize this, and that you are going to focus on political representation, or equal pay for equal work, or government housing policy, will strengthen your essay and clarify your thesis.

**Don't try to cover all of the course material in your essay!**

Instead, tell part of the big story of the course in the small space of your essay by using 2 or 3 carefully chosen and deeply analyzed cases or examples.

**For in-class exams**, your responses must necessarily be even more limited in scope, since you are faced with strict time limits.

**Remember the focus should always be on your argument.**

Your sources are supports for your argument. Avoid quoting or summarizing unless it is crucial for the points you want to make.

#### **IV. Organization**

##### **For take-home exams:**

Before you begin writing, make an outline using one complete sentence that encapsulates the key point of each paragraph.

1. For your introduction, this sentence should be your thesis statement. This is the sentence that states the argument you will make in the body of your paper.
2. For the paragraphs in the body of your essay, this sentence should be the first (topic) sentence of each paragraph. This is the sentence that provides a transition between ideas and/or introduces new points or major themes in your argument.
3. Then make a list of the 2 or 3 pieces of evidence you will use to support each major point of your argument, and the relevant citational information.
4. Even though this is an exam, your essay should have an identifiable introduction and conclusion.
5. Essay exam responses should be concise and to the point; 5 or 6 strong paragraphs are better than 8 or 10 poorly organized ones.

##### **For in-class exams:**

Before you begin writing, spend 5 minutes making a brief, schematic outline. Taking a few minutes to organize your ideas first will result in a much more coherent essay, with no key points left out.

1. Write out a concise statement of your argument (your thesis), and indicate what major point you will make in each paragraph.
2. Under each major point, list the pieces of evidence you will use to support it, along with the relevant citation.
3. Remember that even though this is an exam, your essay should have an identifiable introduction and conclusion.
4. Essay exam responses should be concise and to the point; 5 or 6 strong paragraphs are better than 8 or 10 poorly organized ones.

#### **V. Citation**

**Don't forget to cite all quotations and ideas that you take from other sources. Follow the rules in terms of page and word limits.**

This is an exam, so your citation style may be informal. Indicate the source by author and page number(s) in parentheses in the body of your essay e.g., (Morrison, pp. 23-77)

**For in class exams**, simply indicate the author e.g., (Morrison), or the title e.g., (*Beloved*).

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