

## Preparing for an Essay Exam

### **I. Review course materials and locate course themes.**

- A. Start Early!!! That way, if you realize that you really have no idea what the course is about, or figure out that you totally missed the most important lecture/reading of the course, you have time to talk to your friends/TA/Prof. etc. to catch up.
- B. Make sure you assemble all possible course materials before you start studying: if you missed lecture, ask your friends to look over/make a copy of their notes.
- C. Look over lecture notes and readings, and summarize course themes and each author's main arguments.
- D. Look at the syllabus to see what themes the instructor thinks are important.
- E. Think about how the syllabus is laid out: this will give you a clue about how to put things in conversation with one another.

### **II. Draw connections between authors' arguments and course themes.**

- A. What are the different arguments or points of view concerning a particular topic (i.e., law on the books v. law on the ground, law is powerful v. law is weak, etc.) and how do they relate to class themes?

B. How are authors' arguments similar or different? What ways can you group authors according to their stances?

### III. Consider potential exam questions.

A. If you've been given the questions in advance, failing to offer outstanding responses to questions you've had time to prepare for should make you feel vast amounts of embarrassment and is highly irritating to your TA.

B. If you do NOT have questions in advance, brainstorm questions the instructor might pose that draw together class themes, and then think about how you can use lectures and authors' arguments to answer these questions.

### IV. Think about how you will organize your responses.

A. Develop outlines (intro, body, conclusion) structuring your answers to potential questions.

B. What is your thesis statement and what evidence do you need to support those arguments?

C. What is a thesis statement?

i. A thesis statement is an assertion, backed by evidence, which is falsifiable.

a. It should MAKE A CLAIM.

b. PICK A SIDE; don't be wishy-washy.

c. It's better to be clear and wrong than vague.

- ii. A thesis statement is NOT a statement of opinion or a statement of fact. Here are some ways it should NOT look:
  - a. “I think the American president shouldn’t be too strong, but it shouldn’t be too weak either.”
  - b. Or, “The American presidency was constructed by the framers to be able to act quickly in an emergency, but to be constrained during peacetime.”

D. Remember to keep your argument simple and to the point: reasonable people can disagree with you, but they have to be able to figure out what you are claiming.

## **V. Memorize key terms and facts (events, names, dates, and definitions)**

- A. Memorize whatever you think will help you to convince your reader that your claim is true (but also pay attention to competing points of view).
- B. Think about it from the point of view of the person who is grading 50+ of these: what will make yours stand out in a good way? (There are also ways to stand out in bad ways, FYI.)
- C. If you DO NOT get the questions in advance, this is even more important. Consider what will be most helpful in answering potential questions by paying attention to things the instructor has identified as important puzzles, turning points or crucial moments.

## When you Receive the Exam (or the Study Guide)

### I. Deconstruct the Essay Question

A. Identify the primary and secondary parts of the question.

- i. The primary question asks you to make an argument using course materials. Your thesis will be a response to this question.
- ii. The secondary questions provide a guideline regarding what concepts or ideas you will need to address in your response. It is important to think about how the secondary points link back to the primary question so that your answer is both comprehensive and cohesive.
- iii. Identify each individual question and address each one in your outline and answer. But make sure you are also thinking beyond the question to larger course themes.

B. **Pay attention to instructions!** Read questions and instructions carefully. If it says answer two of three, only answer two.

C. **Budget your time** – based on the relative points for each question.

## **II. Create an Outline** (1. I'm not kidding and 2. not a stupid one)

- A. **Write your thesis** - make it simple, straight-forward and clear; make sure it addresses the primary question. It's often easiest to use the language of the exam to create your thesis statement.
  
- B. **Create main points** - jot down a number of points that will serve as the basis of your response to the primary question and each sub-question. Try to organize your points in a coherent manner--one point should flow into the next.
  
- C. **Brainstorm supporting evidence** - include key terms, theories, authors, events, etc. in your outline under the main points that they provide evidence for

## Writing the Essay

- I. **Follow the outline** – You’ve already done the hardest part. Now just fill in the gaps. A clear structure demonstrates to your reader that you know what is important and what doesn’t pertain to this question.
- II. **Avoid lengthy introductions** - get straight into your main argument; a thesis should make up the bulk of an introduction.
- III. **Be concise and clear** - don't worry about creating beautiful writing. Instead make sure you demonstrate knowledge of the topic and address the essay question in your thesis statement.
- IV. **Use key terms** - be sure to define them. One effective method is to underline key terms and theories most central to your argument.
- V. **Don't stress about exact quotations** - if you have a clear understanding about an author or author’s writing, paraphrase it or make an inexact quote. **NOTE:** This is a BIG difference with essays on which you are given a day or more to write.
- VI. **When you are done, be done** – going around in circles and reiterating key points over and over confuses the reader and makes him or her doubt you know what you’re talking about. If you’ve finished with what you know at half a page, be done and move on.

- VII. Think quality, not quantity!!** - don't try to pad your answer!
  
- VIII. Watch the clock** - you should be writing your conclusion with no less than five minutes left. "The End" does not qualify as a satisfactory conclusion.