

Taking Essay Exams

To master an essay exam, a student needs to do two things, usually in a limited time: figure out what the question is asking, and organize and write the answer. Below are some tips for doing both.

Analyze the Question

Below is a sample essay question, followed by an analysis of what the student is expected to provide in way of an answer.

Sometimes a good theory can solve a debate in a particular research area by showing how seemingly contradictory findings can actually result from the same underlying psychological process. Give two examples of theories that do this in social psychology, and explain how they accomplish it.

1. First, look for what kind of information you are expected to provide: a list? an example? an opinion? an argument?

The second sentence tells you: Give two examples and explain how they meet the criteria in the first sentence.

2. Next, work back and fill in the details: an example of what? an opinion about what? Don't rush through when reading a question; you risk making the costly mistake of answering the wrong question.

For example, a student in a hurry might think the question asks for two examples of good theories that solved debates. But the question is narrower than that. It asks for two theories that show how a single process can account for findings that were in conflict before.

3. If you're in doubt as to whether you understand the question means, ask your instructor.

See our handout on definitions of writing terms, which defines what instructors mean when they say things such as "Discuss X" or "Describe Y" or "Criticize Z".

Organize Your Answer

1. It may be helpful to briefly outline your answer before you write it out. This will keep you from getting lost in the middle of the essay, and will remind you to leave enough time to answer all the parts of the question. If there is a page limit on the essay, put the outline on a separate page.
2. Another outline strategy is to go through the test and outline each answer before writing any of them. With this strategy, if you run out of time to answer all the questions, your outlines may gain you some partial credit.
3. Read the exam question for clues about organization. For example, if the question asks you to give a list or an outline, don't waste your time writing a formal essay.

Manage Your Time

Always read through **all** exam questions before you start writing. Then decide the best way to manage your time. For example, some students prefer to answer the easiest questions first, and others like to start with the questions that are worth the most points.