

## Writing Essay Exams

When you get an essay exam, don't just start in writing an answer without first setting up a strategy to follow. Formulating outlines for all the questions first can help you in several ways. They will help you write an organized answer, rather than rambling without any direction. They will ease the tension while you write because you won't have to think about what points you are going to write on, or how they will be put together, only the presentation of the details. They will also help you determine which questions to answer and in what order, based on the best outlines you have generated. Outlines will also help make the transition easier from one question to the next, because you will already know what you need to write and won't have to stop to formulate a strategy. With this in mind, follow these three parts of the essay exam writing process:

1) **Analyze, mark, and number** the parts of each question before you begin to write the answer. *Underline* key terminology. *Circle* words that tell you what to do such as compare, contrast, list, describe, enumerate, critically evaluate, explain, define, etc., and then do exactly what those words tell you to do as you think through and compose your answer. Don't let haste or nervousness cause you to misread important words in the question, such as physiological rather than psychological, or environmental instead of evolutionary. Finally, notice if you are asked to reproduce material from the textbooks or lectures, if you are asked to give your own opinions, evaluations, examples, or if you are asked to do a combination of these things. *Make sure you do exactly what the question asks you to do. Don't stray off into unnecessary deliberation.*

Here is an example of a question that has been marked and numbered (with Roman numerals, underlines, and bolds for circles) to help indicate what you need to write about, how, and in what order. Follow the structure/order that the question sets up for you to build an outline.

Explain the difference between specialized and general vocabulary and give an example of each. Name and describe three methods for learning both types of vocabulary that are taught in the textbook. Identify the method that works best for you, give an example of how you used it, and explain why you prefer it to other methods.

I. **Explain** the difference between specialized and general vocabulary and **give an example of each**. II. **Name** and **describe** three methods for learning both types of vocabulary that are taught in the textbook. III. **Identify** the method that works best for you, **give an example** of how you used it, and **explain** why you prefer it to other methods.

Note how this infers a structure:

Topic sentence: (should contain) specialized and general vocabulary

- I. Explain the difference by giving examples
  - a. specialized
  - b. general
- II. Name and describe three methods for both (cite textbook)
  - a. specialized
    - method 1 --
    - method 2 --

- method 3 --
- b. general
  - method 1 --
  - method 2 --
  - method 3 --

### III. Identify method of preference

- a. give example of use
- b. explain preference--why (contrast to other methods?)

If you are not allowed to write on the exam itself, you might write these notes on a piece of paper or on a page from your exam booklet. Some students, who know the material well, only write the initials of words. If initials aren't enough, then write the words. But write as little as possible, as quickly as possible. Keep this approach throughout the exam. If you continue to have ideas for the question you are working on, incorporate them into your working outline. If you get some ideas for another question, then stop and jot them down in a makeshift outline before you forget them.

2) It is also crucial to **understand the meaning of key direction words** and to do what they ask. Some common ones are:

- a. Compare--asks you to show similarities. It can also imply that you show differences. Read the question carefully to see if you are asked to do both.
- b. Contrast- asks you to show differences.
- c. List, outline, or enumerate--ask you to abandon a usual paragraph format and to number and list items down the page.
- d. Explain and discuss--calls for a complete explanation, written in paragraphs, with a topic sentence and plenty of supporting details from the course itself.
- e. Describe--asks for characteristics and any details that you can visualize and then verbalize.
- f. Critically evaluate, interpret, or give your opinion about--invites you to include your own ideas, more or less analytically depending on the term, and again in paragraph form.
- g. Identify--means to name and give information/details.
- h. Define--asks for the meaning of the item, most often a disciplinary definition that has been discussed in class rather than your own.
- i. Prove or show--asks for logical argumentation with explanations, quotations, statistics, facts, or even graphs or charts, in an attempt to persuade the reader.

3) **As you write:**

- a. Manage your time. Remember that if you run out of time and write only half of the exam perfectly, you will only get a 50 on it.
- b. Answer all parts of the question. Refer back to the numbered parts of the question or to your list or outline.
- c. Come right to the point in the first sentence.
- d. Stick to your outline. Be sure to start a new paragraph for each new section of your outline.
- e. Be specific by using various types of supporting detail in your answer.
- f. Use transitions for even more clarity. Any type of transition is a plus.
- g. Write all that is relevant and no more.

