

# Essay Exams

## Strategies for Good Grades

Writing essay exams is often an unnerving experience for college students, especially when a significant portion of their grade is contingent upon their essays. Too many students make the error of thinking the best way to answer an essay question is to write down anything and everything they know about the topic as fast as they can. This frenzied method of handling an essay exam has one's pen flying across the paper in a desperate attempt to write as much as possible.

This frenzied approach is intensified by the time constraint of the essay exam period which seems to urge students to neglect the skills of pre-writing, freewriting, and re-writing (revision) learned in composition classes. Little or no time is taken to think about the essay test question or to organize an appropriate answer. The resulting grade is usually disappointing. The poor result from this frenzied approach is not necessarily from the student's lack of knowledge about the subject, but rather from their lack of the basic skills needed to write a good essay test answer which demonstrates what you have learned. It is especially frustrating to receive a bad grade when you thought you knew the material.

### OBJECTIVES

The following information will assist you in overcoming the difficulties identified above by:

1. Describing a simple five step formula for writing good essay question answers.
2. Emphasizing the importance of identifying the central topic and key operative terms within the question.
3. Explaining three ways of rephrasing the essay question to derive a controlling sentence.

### **Strategy #1 - - READ THE QUESTION CAREFULLY**

The first step in correctly handling an essay test question is to read the question several times until you are sure you know what the teacher is asking. You don't want to be like the student who wrote a great answer to a question which wasn't asked (and received no credit)!

You should identify two things in the question: (a) the central topic and (b) the key operative terms. The key operative term tells you how you are to treat the topic, i.e., whether you are to compare, contrast, criticize, describe, evaluate, explain, interpret, relate, summarize, trace, etc. If you don't treat the topic in the manner indicated by the key operative term, then you won't receive full (if any) credit. The table below contains several essay test questions with the key operative terms and central ideas identified.

<u>Question</u>	<u>Key Operative Term</u>	<u>Central Idea</u>
1. Describe the political, social, and economic consequences of the Civil War	to describe	consequences of the Civil War (not just the Civil War)
2. Compare and contrast Odysseus and Aeneas as epic heroes.	to compare and contrast	epic heroes (the two individuals are examples)
3. Evaluate the ethical theory of hedonism.	to evaluate	hedonism
4. Explain the immediate effect of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima.	to explain	effect (or consequences) of the atomic bomb

A workable technique during an exam is simply to circle the central topic and underline the key operative word. A glossary of these key operative terms as used in essay questions is found at the end of this writing aid.

## Strategy #2 - - REPHRASE THE QUESTION INTO A CONTROLLING STATEMENT

A controlling statement merely introduces the topic of your composition. There are at least two easy ways of rephrasing the question to produce a controlling statement. One way of introducing the controlling statement which often works is simply to drop the key operative word and then to re-state the remainder of the question as a simple, declarative statement identifying the central idea. A second way of introducing the topic is by using a statement of purpose. The statement of purpose always contains, or starts with, an infinitive, and uses the key operative term to develop this infinitive.

The table below contains several essay test questions with examples of both types of controlling statements derived from each question.

<u>The Question (or prompt)</u>	<u>Re-written as a Controlling Statement</u>
a. Explain the immediate effect of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. The immediate effects of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima were devastating.</li><li>2. I am going <u>to explain</u> the effect of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima.</li></ol>
b. Discuss the principle causes of the American Revolution.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. The American Revolution resulted from three major causes.</li><li>2. I am going to discuss the causes of the American Revolution.</li></ol>
c. Describe the political, social, and economic consequences of the Civil War.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. The Civil War had three main consequences.</li><li>2. I am going to describe the political, social, and economic consequences of the Civil War.</li></ol>
d. Evaluate the ethical theory of hedonism.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Hedonism is a bad ethical theory.</li><li>2. In this paper I shall argue (<i>grammatically equivalent to "I am going <u>to argue</u>"</i>) that hedonism is a morally bankrupt ethical theory.</li></ol>

Your thesis should be a short, simple declarative sentence. Write it as the first line of your essay. This statement is your controlling idea, but it obviously needs development.

### Strategy #3 - - OUTLINE THE MAIN POINTS YOU INTEND TO COVER

Take a few moments to think before you begin writing. Jot down all the important information on the topic and work it into a brief outline. This will serve to organize your thoughts. You can do this on the back of your paper, or even in the margin. Using a simple topic outline rather than a sentence outline will also save time.

**Mind mapping** is also another tool used for organizing your paper. Figure 1 shows an example of mind mapping and how to set it up. Designate the topics of each section followed by the subtopic of what you will be discussing. You can decide how many subtopics you want your paper to have.

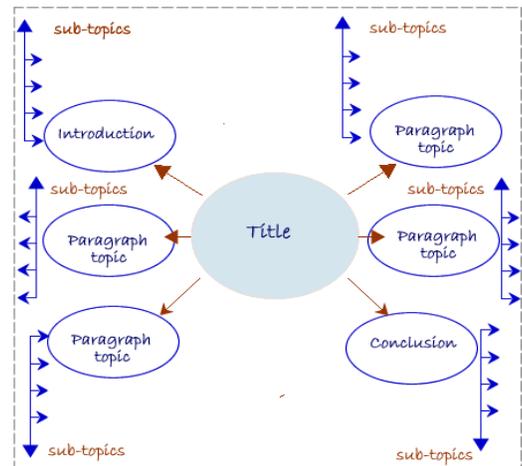


Figure 1: Developed by the Study & Learning Centre, RMIT © 2007

By the time you finish this you should have in mind, or on paper, three or four sentences supporting your thesis statement. Each of these three or four sentences will serve as the topic sentence for three or four paragraphs.

### Strategy #4 - - WRITE YOUR ESSAY

Now you are ready to begin writing a good answer to an essay question. You have (1) identified the central topic and (2) the key operative term, and you have (3) written your controlling statement and (4) jotted down several support ideas. Now you need to write several sentences supporting each support idea. These sentences may convey information or facts, provide examples or illustrations, offer definitions (especially of key terms), etc.

Write clear, grammatically correct sentences. Do not force your professor to extricate your response from unclear, misleading or grammatically incorrect statements - - some will refuse to do it, and all will penalize you. Your grade will suffer!

## **Strategy #5 - - PROOFREAD AND REVISE YOUR ESSAY**

This does not demand a complete revision or re-writing of your essay. Rather, it is merely an opportunity for you to re-read each sentence in your essay in order to see if it actually says what you wanted it to say. Remember, if your statements don't make sense to you, then they probably won't make sense to your professor either. This is also an opportunity to correct any spelling or punctuation errors.

## **ADDITIONAL READING MATERIALS**

Almost any of the materials currently available which discuss what is expected of students on the TASP Writing Sample will be helpful. The following materials are especially valuable and are available in the SLAC Bookcase on the seventh floor of the Moody Learning Center.

1. Kerrigan, William J. *Writing to the Point: Six Basic Steps*. Third Edition. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. 1983.
2. Langan, John. *College Writing Skills with Readings*. Third Edition. McGraw-Hill Publishing Co., 1993.
3. Orozco, Ignacio and Richard Oliver. *The TASP Writing Sample*. SLAC Writing Aid #3.
4. Sebranek, Patrick, Verne Meyer and Dave Kemper. *Writers Inc*. Write Source Educational Publishing House, 1989.

Handout developed by Dr. Richard Oliver, 1995  
Revised by *Delana Gonzales* June 11, 2012  
Student Learning Assistance Center (SLAC)  
San Antonio College, 1995