

Preparing for an Essay Exam

In many writing intensive courses, you will be required to perform an essay exam. Essay exams vary depending on what type of class you are taking. You may have a professor that gives you the prompt a week beforehand or the day of the exam. Nevertheless, you should prepare for your essay exam before and during by generating ideas, planning, and revising.

Before the Essay Exam

Take good notes during class. If you're lucky, your professor may say key phrases like: "This is important," "This will be on the exam," or "You should be taking notes over this." However, professors might not drop these not-so-subtle hints, so you should focus on what was most emphasized in lectures, homework, and/or readings.

Pay extra attention to major concepts that are signified by the boldface headings in your textbooks.

Make a list of all the major concepts. List important details on the major concepts: Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How. For English classes, this may be about who wrote which work, important themes, or events of material read in class.

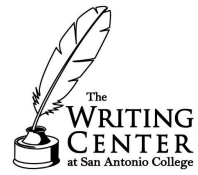
Create a timeline of events. For most history classes, creating a timeline of major events or people will help in writing chronologically. For English classes, it may help to list the order of major events in works of literature.

After creating your list of concepts, you will organize them into an outline. Some ways to organize are by chronologically, by similar subject, or by main characters.

Simplify your outlines into easy to remember keywords. This will help you minimize memorization and focus on the big ideas.

Practice writing. Create an essay based off the outlines you've constructed. This may help guide you in looking for areas that need more studying. It is also helpful to time yourself to see how effective your writing will be during the essay exam.

During the Essay Exam



After you are handed the exam what do you do? Freak out? No! Well maybe, but only for a minute or two. Once you can focus on the question(s) presented in front of you, use these guidelines to make the process doable.

Taking an Essay Exam in 5 Easy Steps:

1) Read the question

Essay questions are worded very precisely. Focus on what you are being asked to write and formulate a specific answer to that question. Some questions may ask you to analyze the subject with a judgment call. This question may even be the basis of your thesis.

Example:

“What evidence indicates innate factors in perceptual organization? You might find it useful to recall any research that shows how infants perceive depth and forms” (Kennedy, Kennedy, and Muth 334).

2) Brainstorm

After reading the question the next step is to write out what you know on the topic. A starting place would be to ask the **5 W's**: who, what, when, where, and why. Make sure that these responses answer the question.

3) Organize and Outline

After brainstorming a brief answer to the question, you should organize it in what you will write first, second, and so forth. The order should present a logical chronological unfolding of your response to the question. Make sure you have a clear thesis statement and topic sentences for each paragraph.

Example:

Thesis: Research on infants is probably the best way to demonstrate that some factors in perceptual organization are innate.

Cliff box (*topic one*) – kid fears drop despite glass, mother; knows shallow side safe

Size consistency (*topic two*) – learned early if not intrinsic

Shapes (*topic three*) – infants respond more/better to face shape than nonformed

Match sound w/sight (*topic four*) – 2 TVs, look twice as much as right one [italics added] ((Kennedy, Kennedy, and Muth 334)

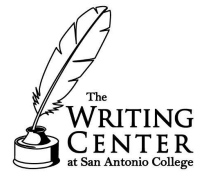
4) Write

Just go for it! Don't worry about the title or introduction. It is more important to have solid body paragraphs that provide evidence and examples that answer the question than a perfect introduction or conclusion. Also, don't worry about grammar too much, it is important, but you want to spend the



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majority of your time getting your point across. Remember you might only have 50 minutes.

5) Go Back and Revise

If you have some extra time, go back and read what you wrote. You may have left something out or not answered the question as much as you could have.

Work Cited

Kennedy, X J., Dorothy M. Kennedy, and Marcia F. Muth. *The Bedford Guide for College Writers with Reader, Research Manual, and Handbook*. Boston, Massachusetts: Bedford/St Martin's, 2014. Print.