



Exam/Study Tip # 36: Strategies for Essay Style Exam Questions

- Before your exam, determine the criteria that will be used to judge your answers.
- Allocate a set time to complete each question taking the weighting of each question into consideration.
- Don't be tempted to spend more time than you have allowed on a single question.

The law of diminishing returns states that if you spend twice as long on an essay you won't get twice the marks for it! It's better to provide reasonable answers to all the questions required rather than a brilliant answer for one and very little for another.

- Start with the easiest question and do the hardest last. This approach reduces anxiety and helps you think more clearly.
- As a general rule, budget each question as follows:

15-20% of the time for thinking about the question and outlining a response to it.
60-70% of the time to write out your answer.
10-20% of the time to read it over and make any necessary edits or clarifications.

- Do a "Memory Dump" when your writing time starts. Jot down any ideas, facts, figures, etc. which could be used in answering the questions.
- Read every essay question carefully and circle the key words and verbs that give you direction.

Determine what information is given, what information is requested for the answer, and how you are to answer the question (e.g. compare, contrast, prove, summarise, etc.).

- Break down complex questions into smaller parts, numbering each to make sure all parts are answered.
- If you are given a choice as to which question(s) to answer, you should not just answer the first essay question that sounds ideal. Instead, you should read through all of the options and jot down really brief ideas for each question before deciding.
- If you don't know much about a question, relax and brainstorm on the topic for a few moments. Recall pages from your texts and class discussions to trigger your memory about ideas relevant to the question. Write these ideas down as coherently as you can.
- Before attempting to answer a question, put it in your own words. Now compare your version with the actual exam question. Do they mean the same thing? If they don't, you've misread the question. You'll be surprised how often they don't agree.

- Organize your thoughts before you begin to write. Don't write your answer in a haphazard "think-as-you-go" manner.

Formulate an outline by listing your points in the order they are to be discussed. This may seem like a large investment of time, but outlining ensures that your response is organised and answers the question asked. In some cases, even if you can't finish the essay, you can get partial credit for the outline.

Note that outlining is not the only way to organise information. You may choose to organise your discussion points using a herringbone map, a matrix or table, a hierarchy or array, a flow chart, or a spider map.

- Unless otherwise instructed by your teachers, structure your answer in the same way as you would for an essay for an English class.

Include an introduction, body, and conclusion.

Use your first paragraph to provide an overview of your essay. Use the rest of your essay to discuss these points in more detail.

Provide a clear thesis statement (statement of purpose) that directly responds to the question and place it as near to the beginning as possible.

Begin each paragraph with a clear topic sentence that explains the main point that you will develop.

Use proper grammar, punctuation and sentence skills. Always write complete sentences.

Don't give your personal opinion unless the question calls for it.

Use facts to support your arguments.

Use the technical language of the subject.

Think in threes: three paragraphs, three sentences per paragraph, three examples per main point, etc.

- Your response to any essay style question should be **specific and focused**.

Don't pad your answer with all kinds of information in the hope that some of the information will be relevant to the question.

Be direct and to the point.

Where possible, state your main point in the first sentence.

A strong response is not about how much you know, but all about how you apply your knowledge to the task of answering a specific question. This means making choices. Think of everything you know on the chosen exam topic as a reservoir of information from which you will need to draw and utilise only the parts that are relevant to the question you have chosen. This often means leaving behind some well-revised material, which can be painful – but your honed-down, carefully applied answer will be all the better for it.

- Your response to any essay style question should be **supported**.

Do more than just state your points.

The bulk of your essay should be devoted to the evidence that supports your answer.

A complete answer usually has a main idea, supporting facts or quotations to prove your statement and illustrative examples.

Use cue phrases such as "for example," "another example," or "in contrast" to highlight the fact that you are using specific evidence to support your ideas. Other cue words include: comparisons, similarities, differences, supports, arguments, reasons, most, probably, main point, exceptions, etc.



- Arguments and evidence are less valuable when they are separated from one another. A response that lists a long string of facts but that fails to interpret or explain these facts is just as flawed as a response that contains many interesting ideas but that does not support these ideas with specific examples.
- Be as specific as you can be without being wrong. It's better to say "toward the end of the 19th century" than to say "in 1894" when you can't remember whether it's 1884 or 1894. In many cases, the approximate time is all that is wanted; unfortunately, 1894, though approximate, may be incorrect, and will usually be marked accordingly.
- Proofread your essay and make corrections as needed.

For content, did you answer the question, and did you stick to your point of view? For organisation, did you answer all parts of the question, and are paragraphs and sentences logically ordered? For writing, is your answer clear, is your writing legible, is your grammar and spelling correct, and is your punctuation correct?

- Use partial answers and outlines if you aren't sure or are running out of time.
- Inevitably when time is short, conclusions are the part of an exam response most likely to suffer. You may find you have little time remaining to review your arguments, but a short paragraph returning to the question and concentrating on some key concluding comments will give your work a sense of completion. Remember, it is the last word on the subject that your examiner will read!



- Write your answer legibly so that you don't have to waste time rewriting it.
- Cross out anything you write but want to delete. This is faster and neater than trying to erase it.
- Skip a line between paragraphs.

Important Points

- Markers are influenced by compactness, completeness and clarity of an organised answer.
- Make sure your essay answers the question as it's put, not as you would like it to have been phrased.
- Writing in the hope that the right answer will somehow turn up is time-consuming and usually futile.
- To know a little and to present that little well is, by and large, superior to knowing much and presenting it poorly, when judged by the grade received.
- Make your responses stand out from your peers by using quotes or facts that most other students wouldn't use.
- Don't labour excessively over word choice, style and spelling as though you are writing the final draft of an essay. It is perfectly acceptable to cross things out and insert or correct words. If you have any extra time at the end, reread your answers to improve the rough bits of wording, weak transitions, and so on.
- As students move ahead with the writing, they may think of new sub points or ideas to include in the essay. If they are most appropriately inserted in a section that has already written, it's best to write them neatly in the margin, at the top of the page, or on the last page, with arrows or marks to alert the reader to where they fit in your answer, being as neat and clear as possible.

Regards,
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