ESSAY EXAM

Underline key words in the question and use them in your essay

Plan your essay

Do the easiest question first – that will give your brain time to warm up!

PURPOSE

Essay exams require you to demonstrate that you can recall the content of the course. They also require that you can fit that content to the question and put together a clear argument in an essay format. Do not simply memorise an essay that you have prepared as a response to a former exam question! The question in your exam might be quite different to that one and your answer will be inaccurate or sound odd. It is much better to memorise relevant quotations, facts, passages or statistics from your set texts and then, in your planning time, to organise this information into a strong response to the question.

Clear, legible handwriting is also important. If your cursive handwriting is very hard to read try printing instead. If your handwriting is very small, leave spaces between the lines to make it easier for your examiner to read.

BREAKING DOWN THE ESSAY QUESTION

Before attempting to answer a question try to put it into your own words. While it is still important to use some of the terms of the original question in your response, this activity will help provide a clearer picture as to what the question is really asking you.

KEY WORDS

Highlight any key words in the question that tell you how it should be answered. These include words such as ‘describe’, ‘compare’, ‘contrast’ or ‘evaluate’. Then circle any content words to ensure that you don’t leave out any aspects of the question in your answer.

For more detail and examples: See Better Essays – Online Programs.
### KEY WORD DIRECTIVE VERBS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Word</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Account for</td>
<td>Explain why rather than just define</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyse</td>
<td>Separate into component parts and show how they interrelate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compare</td>
<td>Point out the differences and similarities between two or more items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrast</td>
<td>Point out the differences only between two or more items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe</td>
<td>Write down the information in the right order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain</td>
<td>Make the cause of something clear</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discuss</td>
<td>Present arguments for and against the topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justify</td>
<td>Present a valid argument about why a theory should be accepted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarise</td>
<td>State the main features of an argument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trace</td>
<td>Follow the development or history of a topic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For more detail and examples: [See Better Essays – Online Programs](http://life.curtin.edu.au/learning-support/the-learning-centre.htm)
PLANNING

Use your planning time to make a brief outline of your response to the question. Jot down the main ideas you want to discuss or your central argument. Then list related ideas. Remember to group similar ideas next to each other so that your essay doesn’t sound too fragmented. Use this outline as a ‘map’ to guide you when you are writing your answer. Make sure that your information always relates back to the question.

WRITING THE ESSAY

If you run out of your allocated time for one question then move quickly onto the next one. You may have time to return and finish it in your revision time near the end of the examination. Try to make sure that you attempt a response to all of the required questions.

The first paragraph should provide an overview of the rest of the essay. Don’t forget to include linking sentences whenever possible between key ideas or to introduce new paragraphs. This will ensure that your essay will read smoothly and not sound too stilted. While your examiners are aware that you are writing under pressure they will still expect spelling, grammar and punctuation to be of a high standard. It is also important to keep your own voice or ideas at the fore-front of the essay, particularly when writing in the humanities. You can do this by using a number of mini-quotes in grammatically correct ways rather than one or two longer quotations.

CITATION

For take-home or open-book exams you will need to cite or reference accurately all quotations and ideas that you take from other sources. Check with your course lecturers to see what style they require. For closed-book exams you may be allowed to simply indicate the author or the title of the work you are referring to. Make sure that any authors or titles you include are spelt correctly.

REVIEWING

Reviewing your work is an essential step in any exam. Allow time to check for spelling, grammar and punctuation and to ensure that your ideas flow smoothly and are presented in a logical order. Return to any essays that are incomplete and try to finish them and check to make sure you have used correct terms, dates or figures.

This handout includes material adapted from: http://www.adprima.com, http://www.iss.stthomas.edu/studyguides/, http://sas.calpoly.edu/asc/sd.html, Sam McCarter and Phil Jakes, Uncovering EAP: How to Teach Academic Writing and Reading (Oxford: Macmillan Education, 2009), and information from the University of Reading’s Online Study Advice pages.
STRUCTURE

Each paragraph has a

- topic sentence,
- body,
- wrap sentence.

The topic sentence

- states the paragraph’s main point—following sentences support the topic sentence by explaining, clarifying, defending, giving examples, filling in details;
- should be clear and stand out from the rest of the paragraph—makes it easier for readers to grasp your main points;
- connects to the wrap of the previous paragraph.

If you have written clear topic sentences that do state the paragraph’s main point, you can write a summary of your thesis chapter or paper by listing these sentences. When you’re editing your chapter or paper, this summary helps you to identify any paragraphs that have gone off-track or are out of sequence.

The body

- comprises sentences that support the topic sentence by justifying, explaining, clarifying, supporting, elaborating on, giving evidence for your topic sentence, giving examples, or filling in details.

The wrap sentence

- closes the paragraph as a unit of thought,
- reinforces the paragraph’s main point,
- can assess the significance of what is established in the paragraph.
COHESION WITHIN AND BETWEEN PARAGRAPHS

Transition markers

- words or phrases used to link sentences and paragraphs
- give your writing coherence
- help your reader to follow the direction of your argument.

A few transition phrases

- **Adding**: and, also, in addition, moreover, furthermore
- **Clarifying**: in other words, that is, in effect, to simplify
- **Sequencing**: to begin with, firstly, secondly, lastly, finally
- **Contrasting**: however, nevertheless, nonetheless, on the contrary, on the other hand, by contrast
- **Exemplifying**: for example, for instance, in particular, to illustrate
- **Conceding a point**: although true, even though, although, despite this
- **Summing up**: to summarise, to conclude, in conclusion, clearly then
- **Stating a result**: therefore, thus, as a result, consequently, accordingly, for that reason.

Repeat transition

Words from the end of the previous paragraph are repeated in the first sentence of the following paragraph.

**Example:**

Topic sentence, body, then the wrap sentence: *Hard work, specialist knowledge, and the ability to apply yourself to new situations are the keys to professional success.*

New paragraph

*Professional success is not, however, the only factor in leading a fulfilling life.*
Repeat idea transition
Ideas from the end of the previous paragraph are referred back to in the first sentence of the following paragraph.

Example:
Topic sentence, body, then the wrap sentence: *In these conditions students are not motivated to perform well.*

New paragraph
*Such a lack of motivation must be addressed by analysis of the learning situation.*
(This is the topic sentence, and will be followed by the body and a wrap sentence.)

For more detail and examples: See Better Essays – Online Programs or Better Tests – Essays in Exams