

Writing Timed Essays

Why a Timed, Essay Exam?

Most of time in your college career you will be required to produce three kinds of writing:

1. Research paper
2. Essay exam
3. Timed, essay exam

While the connection between a research paper and an essay may seem obvious, the purpose of the timed, essay exam may not be as apparent. Whereas a research paper or essay emphasizes writing skills, the timed essay is designed to gauge your ability to synthesize course materials (notes, articles, texts) into the key course topics.

In short, the timed, essay exam is designed to measure your ability to analyze and think critically about the course material within a structured environment.

Even if you think a timed essay is not valid, it is something you must do in your college career.

The ability to think critically and analyze material is a fundamental skill that is used in almost all college courses.

Preparing for the Exam

You may find yourself thinking about what your professor wants.

Typical Question: “What is my professor looking for?”

This is a question that most students ask before an essay exam.

The problem with this question is that it can lead one to believe that what is required to prepare for essay exams is the power to read minds.

A better question is this: “What is it that I am supposed to do with the course materials?”

“What is it my professor expects me to be able to do with the course materials?”

Asking the question in this way forces you to integrate class notes, texts, articles, and supplemental material into key course topics.

Early in the semester (or as soon as possible), begin to organize course materials around key topics. Develop a course outline around the key topics. Refer to the table of contents in your course text to assist with the course outline. Start outlining early in the semester and gradually reduce your outline into a broader outline closer to the exam time.

Create relationships between chapters in your textbook and notes.

Ask yourself, “How does each topic relate? What are the differences and similarities between each topic? Why is each essay in its particular chapter? What’s the idea at the center of the course?”

Predicting the Question(s)

What are the questions that will appear on the exam?

By the end of the semester, you should be able to predict what kind of question(s) will appear, if you have used the assigned materials to make connections and reflected on the significance of those connections.

The point of the exam is for you to establish that you have mastered the content of the course. In addition, you should not repeat only what you have learned but also demonstrate that you are able to think *about* and *apply* the ideas that were at the center of the course.

No matter what the question is, even if the question is given in advance, the goal is to give you the opportunity to show what you can do with the course material.

Reviewing for the Exam

One way to prepare for the exam is to not think of it as an in-class essay but as a mini-version of a research paper or regular essay. Use the pre-drafting and planning techniques you have learned in your writing courses, i.e., develop thesis, outline, and integrate notes and text. Support points with facts and evidence.

Afterwards, look over notes, texts, and outline and predict questions by concentrating on key topics and how those topics relate. What topics were given particular emphasis or were repeated? **Note:** Do not assume that there is a relationship between the importance of a topic and the degree of emphasis in class. This is not always true. Again, you should focus on how the material relates to course concepts.

Develop a thesis statement or argument for each key point in your course outline.

You should develop mini-outlines or answers for each thesis statement. Study these and use these as answers for that topic.

Write one or two “mock” essay exams for practice. Generate possible essay questions.

- If possible, get a copy of an old exam.
- If you have been assigned possible essay topics, formulate possible questions for each topic.

Practice writing an essay using one or two of the arguments you have developed from your course outline. Practice writing with an outline, then write an exam under exam conditions without using notes.

During the exam

- Read all instructions and questions completely.
- Resist the temptation to write immediately.
- If you must write, recreate your study outline inside the blue book.
- Wait at least 2-3 minutes and reflect on the question(s).
- Where does it fit into overall context of the course?

During the exam (con't)

-Answer the question(s) directly, and answer the question(s) within the correct context.

- Do not think overly broad or beyond the scope of the question.

(While some students may not put in enough information, others include information that is attenuated and, therefore, useless. Consequently, whatever you had to say that was relevant becomes meaningless. The result is the same: an answer that does not respond to the question.)

-Do not “pad” the answer and hope you will “get it right.” (This looks like, and probably is because, you don’t have an answer. Most instructors give few, if any, points for irrelevant information.)

.Write out an outline or main points you wish to cover inside the blue book or on scratch paper.

.Pace yourself.

(Some students run into trouble by not pacing themselves during the exam. Do not spend ten to twenty minutes on the introduction and only five minutes on the conclusion.

Grammar is important, so spend a few minutes proofreading. However, some courses do not emphasize grammar as much as the arguments you make in your essay.)

Ways to Organize

An essay that is organized well is easier to understand—and easier for your prof to grade.

Random—No point is more significant than the other, but all points do support the overall argument.

Chronological—Sequence of events, but not necessarily in order of importance.

Logical—One point must precede the other to make sense. Emphasizes ideas.

The point is to have a pattern organization or construction that supports your points.

Do not think as you go or use “stream of consciousness.”

The IRAC Method

Deciding what information to include or exclude is another way of demonstrating that you have mastered the material.

Discuss key words in essay questions:

Describe, Explain, Illustrate, Define does NOT mean to repeat facts and information.

These are merely the means or techniques by which you should analyze information.

Do not be conclusory; use specific facts to explain how you arrived at conclusion.

The **IRAC** method (**I**ssue, **R**ule, **A**pplication, **C**onclusion) will assist you in answering any questions.

Using IRAC will assure you that you are not simply listing information or stating a conclusion:

Issue: What points does the question raise? What is the scope of the question?

Key words such as Describe, Discuss, Explain, Compare/Contrast, Examine, Prove, Outline, Illustrate, and Interpret should draw your attention to the scope of the question and the specific bits of information that need to be used to support your thesis.

e.g., Explain what the theme of *Moby Dick* is.

Rule: This refers to the clusters of information, facts, events, and details about a story that are within the scope of the question and apply to question.

e.g., In *Moby Dick*, Ahab searches for a particular whale, at the expense and peril of the crew. Many crew members are not sure if the whale actually exists. The whale is a myth or rumor.

A theme is defined as the generalized or abstract paraphrase of the subject of a work. It is not part of the work but is abstracted from the actual events.

Application: Apply the facts to make larger connections.

Conclusion: The result or the answer. Therefore, the theme of *Moby Dick* is man's struggle to define reality.

Using this methodology will force you to critically examine and analyze the course material. When you use the word "because," you must engage in analysis—because you are explaining **why**.

Take some time at the end, three to five minutes, to proofread, particularly if your professor puts a greater emphasis on grammar. Ask your instructor if you are not sure.

What Happens If You Forget Something?

Often during the course of writing, one idea will spiral into another. In general, you should not drift from your outline, but often during the course of writing, a new point or idea will emerge. Either incorporate that idea into your writing, or if this happens at the end of your essay, add notes in margin.

Try to spend some time at the end the timed-writing session to include pertinent information or points that you have left out. Add paragraphs if possible or draw arrows to the margin where you wish to insert the information or to make corrections.

Summary

Think of your exam as a regular paper assignment in miniature. The key to doing well is to do what you can do with the course material. Think about what the key course concepts are and how they *relate*. To properly understand them, you should stretch the boundaries of these concepts; a concept is illustrated more by the exceptions to the rule rather than by the rule itself. By understanding what something *isn't*, we can better understand what it is. What do these concepts and topics suggest? Your instructor simply wants you to demonstrate that you have understood the central concepts of the course and have mastered the material.