

## In-Class Essay Exams: How to Prep

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Essay exams usually have fewer questions than regular final exams, and often those few questions are related to each other, but worded and focused slightly differently. Doing well on essay exams demands that you be well and thoroughly prepared with the concepts, ideas, theories, and arguments from your course. In general, you need to be able to think critically and to communicate your thoughts in written form. Use the following strategies to help you prepare and tackle essay exams.

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### **Strategy 1: Rehearse the key concepts, ideas, and theories from your course**

By memorizing and focusing your studying on understanding the key issues, themes, and concepts of the course, you are able to understand your content better to see the connections among the themes and issues of the course. By memorizing and understanding this information, you will be able to discuss and apply the theories and course content to posed questions, and the quality of your essay will be better because you incorporated course information.

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### **Strategy 2: Construct possible essay questions that would test the knowledge and skills learned in the course**

Another way to prepare is to construct possible essay questions that would test the knowledge, themes, and skills from your course. Look at course assignments and outlines for the kinds of questions to prepare. Times in your lectures when your instructor said, “this is something to think about” offer a good basis as well. Answering these questions as self-tests is good practice for the actual exam.

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### **Strategy 3: Task Words: Keep in mind how the question is worded!**

Pay attention to task words and be sure to read the essay question(s) carefully. Many students lose marks because they did not answer the essay question. When you preview a test, circle or highlight the task words as reminders of what your essay needs to include and how your writing should be focused.

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#### **Sample of Task Words:**

##### **Identify**

When a question asks you to identify, that means you are asked to give a direct answer and explain it. Other words that are used to “identify” are:

List- write a series of precise statements

Describe- recount, characterize, relate in a logical sequence

Define- give clear, concise, academic meanings

State- present main points in brief, clear sequence, don't mention minor details/examples

Summarize- give the main points or facts in a shortened form, like the summary of a chapter in a novel, and without many minute details

### **Explain**

When a question asks you to explain, that suggests fully thought out and demonstrated answers. A few examples of action words that are used to “explain” are:

Discuss- consider various points of view, analyze carefully, and give reasons for and against

Analyze- summarize in detail a selected focus, consider component parts of ideas and their inter-relationships

Explain- clarify, interpret, give reasons, usually in differences of opinion or of results, or analyze causes

Illustrate- use concrete examples to clarify a point

### **Compare**

When a question asks you to compare, that means you are asked to provide an analysis which works to integrate ideas under focus; emphasizing similarities, differences, and connections between these ideas deepens our understanding of the ideas and may help you contextualize ideas more effectively. A few examples of action words that are used to “compare” are:

Compare- look for qualities or characteristics that resemble each other (similarities)

Contrast- stress differences of ideas, concepts, events, problems, etc., but also note similarities

Relate- show how ideas or concepts are connected to each other, sometimes called “distinguish”

### **Argue**

When a question asks you to argue, that means you need to take a position on an issue and defend it against reasonable alternatives. A few examples of action words that are used to “argue” are:

Prove- establish truth using factual evidence and logical reasoning

Justify- show strong reasons for taking a position, use arguments based on evidence

Related words: agree, disagree, debate, defend

### **Assess**

When a question asks you to assess, that means you need to invoke acceptable criteria to defend a judgement on an issue, idea, or question. A few examples of action words that are used to “assess” are:

Criticize- express your judgement about the value, truth, or usefulness of the view mentioned in the question

Evaluate- give your viewpoint, express the limitations and advantages, and use evidence to support your position

Interpret- translate, give examples or include your viewpoint on a subject

Review- examine a subject critically, analyzing and commenting on it

Related phrases: “to what extent?” and “how well?”

### **General Test Writing Strategy**

Once you understand what your task words are asking you to do, it is important to develop a strategy for the actual writing of the exam. In general, the strategy to follow is:

1. Read over all the essay question choices and make your selection (s) early. Make sure you look at the task words and **understand what each question is asking you to do**. Many students lose marks because they failed to answer their essay question!
2. Divide your time so that you know how many minutes you have per question and make a brief plan for each question before writing. How you divide your time should depend on the worth of the essay question.
  - Organize your thoughts and write a brief outline. The more organized your thoughts are, the easier it will be to write the essay.
3. Plan a little time to review.
4. Always begin with the easiest question.
5. If you are stuck on a question, leave some space to finish it and move on to the next question. Don't stay on the stuck question.

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### **In-Class Writing Tips**

Keep your point and writing straightforward and clear! Do not try to write a really fancy paper. The more clear and precise your essay writing is the better.

Reference! Your instructor wants you to incorporate course materials and concepts into your paper; make sure you reference them!

For the sake of your instructor, double-space your writing! It is easier for them to read and to make corrections.

**Need help improving your academic writing skills? Contact the writing specialist for support:**

**Online: <http://www.mhc.ab.ca/Services/AcademicSupport/WritingSupport>**

**or at the Student Success Centre located in the**

**Vera Bracken Library.**