

Guidelines for Taking an Essay Exam

From the University Learning Centers at Penn State University

- Listen carefully to the teacher's final instructions. Be sure to know how much time is allotted to complete the test, whether all the questions are awarded the same number of points, or if there are any corrections or changes to the test.
- Begin the test at once and keep an eye on the time. Don't spend too much time on one question at the expense of the others.
- Read all the essay questions carefully, but pay special attention to key words.
- Use a logical pattern of organization and a strong topic sentence for each paragraph.
- Write concisely. Do not use abbreviations or nonstandard language.
- Keep the test paper neat with reasonable margins. Neatness and readability are essential to an essay exam.
- Revise and proofread as carefully and completely as time will permit.

Planning and Writing the Essay Test Question

Too many students make the error of thinking the best way to answer an essay question is to write down everything and anything about the topic as fast as they can. Be sure to take the time to think about the question and organize an appropriate answer.

Read the question several times to be sure of what the teacher is asking. Pay special attention to the key words found in every essay question. Responding to the key words is a basic skill for handling essay questions.

Below are some steps for writing a good essay:

1. Read the question several times or until you clearly understand what is being asked.
2. Rephrase the question into a central idea for the essay. Jot down all the important information and work it into a brief outline. Use the back of the test sheet or a piece of scrap paper.
3. Outline the main points that will be covered in your answer. Time will probably not allow all the supporting details to be included.
4. Write the essay. The opening sentence should be a rewording of the question in an answer form. Follow this with any background information necessary for complete understanding of your answer.