#31) Essay Exams

The purpose of this handout is to help you improve your in-class essay exams. Professors design essay exams in a variety of methods. This handout anticipates one of the more common exam arrangements: the students have completed a unit of study and readings, and the professor announces an upcoming in-class essay exam that will offer several prompts based on the readings. The student must know the source materials very well in order to write a good essay. This handout discusses how to prepare for the exam and how to execute the essay.

Prior to the Exam

1. Read source materials carefully.
2. Identify each author’s thesis.
3. Outline each author’s evidence, support and reasoning.
4. Write brief summaries that include concise thesis statements.
5. Look for connections between sources. What common issues do the authors discuss?
6. Write responses to the arguments expressed by each author.
7. Know what the authors say, how they support their positions, and where you stand relative to their arguments and the issues discussed.
8. Do a little research. Learn more about the issues discussed!

Anticipate Questions. Prepare some sample exam prompts (or ask your instructor for practice prompts). Perhaps some of your questions will appear on the exam. Do timed writing to practice responding to a question or two. Use the “During the Exam” instructions that follow while preparing your practice essays.

During the Exam

1. Read the prompt carefully. Examine each word in the prompt to be sure you clearly understand the writing task. Read for key words that indicate how you should respond and organize. (See the list of key terms below.)

2. Brainstorm. Make a list or freewrite to generate ideas.

3. Plan your essay. Make a quick outline to help keep your response organized. Your essay should have an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. Your essay should be organized around a clear thesis.

4. Budget your time. For an 80-minute exam with one essay only, you may want a plan similar to the following:
   a. 10-15 min. / read prompt; revisit sources; brainstorm; outline
   b. 50-55 min. / compose essay
   c. 10-15 min. / edit and proofread essay
For an 80-minute exam with 10 short answer questions (25 pts.) and two short essays (75 pts.), you may want a plan similar to the following:

a. 20 min. / respond to short answer questions
b. 5 min. / read 1st prompt; revisit sources; brainstorm; outline
c. 20 min. / compose 1st essay
d. 5 min. / edit and proofread 1st essay
e. repeat b-d for 2nd prompt and essay

5. Write on Every Other Line. Compose your essay on every other line of your Bluebook so that you can make changes while editing and proofreading. You’ll need the spaces in the blank lines above to present your new text.


7. Use Evidence from the Sources to Support Your Argument. If the prompt asks you to formulate a position in response to the readings, integrate the readings into your discussion. You certainly may introduce outside information which is relevant to the discussion and with which you are familiar, but do not fail to include discussion of the authors’ arguments!

8. Treat the Authors’ Positions Fairly and Thoroughly. When we disagree with the position of an author, we still must take care to present fairly and thoroughly his or her evidence and reasoning. An author may mishandle statistical evidence or misinterpret the findings of a study. However, to make a persuasive case, you first must explain to your reader what the author said or did. Then you may engage in your critical analysis.

9. Arrive Where You Began. Your conclusion should summarize the key points of analysis presented in your essay and restate your thesis in a fresh and interesting way. Your conclusion should indicate to the reader that your essay clearly responds to the prompt. Again, making a quick outline before you begin composing will help to keep you on task and should help you to avoid making digressions.

Key Terms to Watch for in Essay Questions

**Analyze:** to divide and examine each part of a whole, separately and as it relates to the whole  
**Argue:** to assert a position and provide persuasive evidence of support  
**Compare/Contrast:** to examine points of similarity and difference  
**Critique:** to evaluate, identifying both the positive and negative  
**Define:** to specify the meaning, describe essential properties, and provide example(s)  
**Describe:** to set forth objectively in a logically organized arrangement (physical description or a process)  
**Discuss:** to examine and talk about an issue from a variety of perspectives  
**Evaluate:** to make a judgment of negative and/or positive worth using evidence to support  
**Explain:** a general term that can mean the same thing as discuss or to identify causes or meaning of something  
**Illustrate:** to develop and support through specific examples  
**Relate:** to identify connections between two or more ideas, concepts, or things by discussing key characteristics  
**Summarize:** to present the main point(s) or gist of the material in condensed form