

# How to Ace an Essay Exam



Taking any test can be nerve-wracking, and students sometimes complain that taking essay exams is especially intimidating. The pressure of writing clear, cohesive answers with no chance to check your facts and limited time to think and revise does make essay test writing rather challenging. However, there are steps you can follow to make writing essay exams easier.

## #1. While Studying

1. Prepare adequately.
2. Reread notes and text. Observe patterns of organization. Develop a set of basic concepts covered in the chapter.
3. Make up sample questions based on these concepts. Try to incorporate the organizational patterns in your questions (cause and effect, chronological, compare and contrast).
4. Answer your questions. Then check your answers with your notes and text.

## #2. During the Exam

### 1. Budget your time.

Figure out how long each question should take to answer. Be sure to budget in time to check over your work. Keep an eye on the clock as you write and stick to your schedule. You may want to answer essay questions **BEFORE** you do the rest of the test.

### 2. Read the question carefully.

Look for key words like **analyze, compare, evaluate, summarize, trace, justify**, and so on. These words are asking for specific kinds of information and a specific form of presentation. Also make sure that you answer the entire question. Sometimes essay questions have two or more parts that you need to include in your answer.

Be sure to answer the question your instructor is asking. If the question asks you to trace the change in gender roles in America over the past 50 years, and your answer contrasts gender roles in America and Japan or explains what a gender role is, you haven't answered the question and you probably won't get credit. Even though you may have written a brilliant essay, you haven't answered the question your instructor asked.

### 3. Organize before you write.

Jot down facts and figures that support your answer.

**Briefly** outline what you want to say. Get down the things you want to say and the order in which you want to say them.

Create a thesis statement or topic sentence that answers the question. Try to rewrite the question and use that as part of your thesis statement.

For a question like:

*Compare and contrast German and French cathedrals from the Renaissance era.*

Your thesis statement might be:

*Although German and French cathedrals from the Renaissance era incorporate many of the same architectural techniques, there are a number of differences in the two styles.*

### 4. While you write:

Put your thesis statement at the beginning of your answer. Every sentence you write should relate to your stated thesis. If your answer is more than one paragraph long, be sure that each paragraph relates directly to your stated thesis and has a topic sentence tied to the thesis.

Write clearly and neatly, but don't worry too much about style and wording. Get the question answered first. Then if you have time, go back and fix it up.

Check back over your finished answer. Be sure you included all the points you wanted to cover.

Keep in mind that although writing good essay question answers seems complex, you can handle it. You've written papers before. Just modify your approach to fit the limited time schedule. **Prepare, organize, write and check.**