

## WRITING THE ESSAY QUESTION

All literature tests contain essay questions which are a large percentage of the test grade. Knowing how to approach these questions can help ease the anxiety of test taking and improve the grade. Many times students have the necessary information but just don't know how to go about organizing it and getting it onto paper in the time allowed.

Here are some suggestions to remember when answering essay questions.

1. Be sure you understand all parts of the question. Take a deep breath, read the question at least twice and understand its parts. (How many things are you being asked to discuss? Are there clues within the question to the type of answer desired?)
2. Always plan with a rough draft (keep it really rough- not even whole sentences are required) or an outline of main points with a couple of examples so you don't get lost in your own thoughts while writing. This prewriting keeps you on track so you don't lose sight of the question.
3. Your introduction (yes, you need one, no matter how short time is running) should contain all of the following:

- a. A **clear, precise thesis statement**. This is the only sentence in the essay worth writing out completely in a rough draft. It must be exact and contain all your main ideas. It should also contain the title of the work discussed and the author's name.

Ex. "In *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck shows the reader men who are both isolated and somehow crippled."

"*Great Expectations* is Charles Dickens' novel about one boy's journey through selfish childhood to thoughtful adulthood."

- b. Some general lead in to the thesis
- c. Never refer to your own essay with phrases such as:  
"I will discuss" or "This paper is about"

4. Points to remember:

- a. No "**YOU**" anywhere in formal writing. No second person!
- b. Use pronouns only when the antecedent is clear:  
"George told Lennie he was in trouble."

“Then he told him he'd better run or he'd tell where he was.” (Argh, which “he”?)

Use proper nouns more often to avoid these errors.

- c. Watch out for run-ons and fragments- always allow time to proofread. No comma splices!
- d. Use a lot of specific proof to back up each main point.

General statements like “Lennie did some bad things in the novel” or “George wanted to protect Lennie from pain” are too broad. “Lennie killed a puppy and Curley’s wife both by accident.” and “George wanted to save Lennie from being brutally beaten, lynched by an angry mob or tortured by the sadistic Curley eager for revenge from having his hand crushed and wife killed.” are far more concrete and prove you know what you're talking about.

Remember: The teacher has to read LOTS OF THESE ESSAYS. You want to be clear and to the point with enough detail to back up your main points. You'll do best if you are clear. Rambling or being too general will only lose you points. If it begs the questions, then you have not elaborated well enough.