

WRITING THE BEST ESSAY QUESTIONS



WHY WE USE ESSAY QUESTIONS

The Problem: The ability to write well is on the decline among American students, and colleges have recognized this. Writing is an essential business skill, no matter what field you intend to pursue. Colleges have been challenged to improve the writing skills of their students.

The Current Solution: Many colleges have programs in which certain classes have a writing emphasis, even though they *aren't* classes on writing. Classes in the humanities, social sciences, civics and government, etc. are frequently chosen to fill this role. They may be required to include:

- A pre-determined amount of research writing (research papers)
- A pre-determined amount of extemporaneous writing (essay questions on exams)

What This Means to You: Essay questions WILL be a part of your college experience. They should be viewed as *an opportunity to demonstrate your knowledge*; to either *impress or disappoint your instructor*. You might think that essay questions are hard on the student, but they are harder on the instructor who has to grade them.

Your professor won't turn a simple computer-graded fact question into a time-consuming essay question unless he/she wants you to demonstrate your knowledge of a topic. Your professor is looking for AT LEAST a paragraph that demonstrates your mastery of the information. Essay questions are NEVER looking for the shortest answer you can give.

The farther you progress in your educational career, the more important essay exams will become. In graduate school, most of your exams will probably be essay exams. For your doctoral comprehensive exams, you can expect something like 16 hours of essay exams and a one to two hour oral examination by your professors.

STRATEGICALLY ANSWERING ESSAY QUESTIONS

Types of Essay Questions: There are really only two types of essay questions: short and long. If you take an hour-long test that includes 6 or 8 essay questions, your instructor is looking for a paragraph or two on each question. If you take an hour-long test that includes 10 multiple choice questions and only 1 or 2 essay questions, your instructor is looking for one or more pages of information on each essay question. It is critical that you take the time to plan a longer essay question before you begin to write.

How Much Is It Worth? The point value of a question indicates both the importance of the information AND the amount of information your instructor expects you to be able to produce.

Scoring of Essay Questions: Essay questions may be graded by one person or by a team of graders. In large college classes, getting help from assistants is the only way for the instructor to keep up with the volume of writing. Some sort of scoring system makes grading more consistent and fair, regardless of whether the scoring is done by one person or by a team. Scoring systems usually come down to some sort of counting system:

- **ADDING POINTS:** You receive points for correctness and quantity of relevant information. The professor gives the graders a list of items that are relevant to correctly answering the question. Each time you hit one of these in your answer, you gain points.
- **SUBTRACTING POINTS:** You lose points for omitting critical information, or for incorrect information. The professor may give graders the major idea to be expressed in the answer and indicate which items are critical. If any of these are missing or incorrect, or if you include additional incorrect data, you lose points.
- **CHECKS AND X'S:** It's common to see checks and X's (or some similar counting indicator) in the margins of essay questions. Check marks indicate that the grader has given credit for a new item of information; X's indicate either an error or a critical piece of information that was missing from your answer. The grader uses these marks to create your score for that question.

Pointers: Following these suggestions will help you do better on essay exams.

- *Answer the question!*
 - If you must, re-read the question several times to make sure you understand it before you begin writing. A brilliant response that doesn't answer the question is worth 0 points.
- *Be Specific*
 - The more general your answer, the less it's worth. The grader will be looking for specifics. If you haven't included much information, the grader will not find many check marks to add up! A statement like "the Minoans created nice art" is meaningless, tells that grader that you don't know anything about Minoan art, and will NOT receive a check mark. Instead of being new information, it only counts as non-information!
- *Show what you know*
 - Essay questions are an opportunity to demonstrate your knowledge, so use them to your greatest advantage.
 - Add any details that you can to support the thesis of your response. Details get you the check marks that will raise your score.
- *"Fluff" NEVER Helps*
 - No grader is fooled by fluff and all teachers and professors have finely tuned fluff detectors. Restating the question needlessly or sharing your emotional responses (if the question doesn't ask for them) will gain you no check marks and will probably annoy the grader – *never* a good policy. DON'T pad your answers with non-informative fluff.

