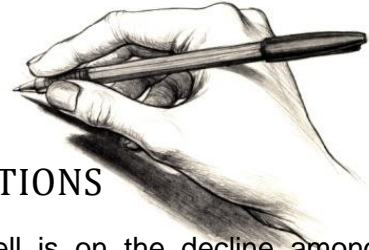




WRITING THE BEST ANSWERS TO ESSAY QUESTIONS



WHY WE USE ESSAY QUESTIONS

The Problem: The ability to write well is on the decline among American students because, frankly, writing projects are tricky to grade and they don't fit on most standardized tests. It is an essential skill that is often neglected out of convenience to the teacher and educational system. Writing remains an essential skill no matter what field you intend to pursue as an adult. Nearly all college level classes will require essay and research writing projects. Colleges expect students to enter with this skill in hand. Those who are not comfortable with the skill will have considerable stress as they play catch up in their first semester.

The Solution: Students who begin college with essay and research writing experience are going to be noticed and appreciated by professors who have no time (or interest) to teach students this core skill. To become sufficiently equipped in essay and research writing (and to avoid *loooooong hours* at your college writing lab getting tutored in these skills), students must gain as much experience as possible during their high school years. This may be painful to some, a delight to others. It remains necessary nonetheless.

WHAT THIS MEANS TO YOU:

Essay questions will be a part of your college experience, like it or not. Even if you choose not to go to college, you can never avoid the need to write a well-organized essay, letter, or document from time to time.

Essay questions on quizzes are assigned because they are an excellent opportunity for a student to demonstrate well-rounded knowledge of a given topic. Your educators assign them *to let you shine!* You've prepared well for an exam. Make all of that hard-won knowledge count on a well-written exam essay.



You might think that writing essay questions are hard on the student, but they are much harder on the instructor who must grade them. ***Your instructor will NEVER turn a simple computer-graded fact question into a time-consuming essay question unless he/she wants you to demonstrate your mastery of a big picture topic. Essay questions are NEVER asking for the shortest answer you can give.*** If you write only a little, your grade will be commensurate.

Essay prompts are almost always big open-ended questions that expect you to really show your great subject mastery!

The farther you progress in your educational career, the more important essay exams will become. In graduate school, many of your exams will be essay exams. For a doctoral degree in many subjects, you can expect something like 16 hours of essay exams and a one to two-hour oral examination by your professors if there's anything left of you afterwards.

Writing out three or four short paragraphs for quizzes in high school is practically nothing by comparison, but here is where you will start.

HOW TO ANSWER ESSAY QUESTIONS *STRATEGICALLY*

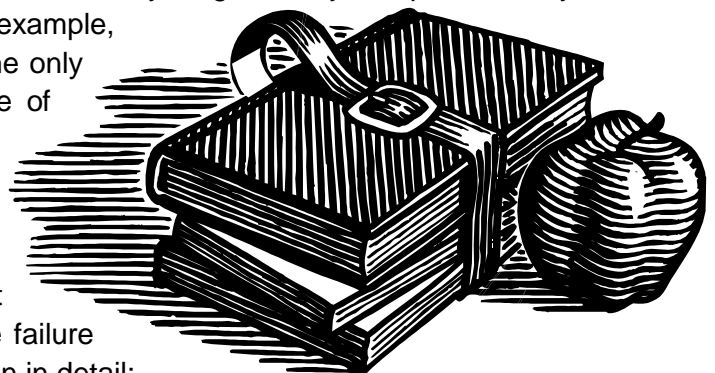
THERE ARE 2 DIFFERENT TYPES OF ESSAY QUESTIONS: *SHORT AND LONG*

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 a much longer piece of writing for one or both of those questions.

It is critical that you take the time to plan a longer essay question before you begin to write it. How do you form a strategic plan for an essay while in the middle of an exam?

How many points is it worth? We normally show you the point values of each question on an exam at The Lukeion Project. What's the code? The point value of a question indicates both the importance of the information AND the amount of information your instructor expects from you. There is a simple relationship between how many points are assigned, and how much time you should spend on an essay answer. On average, every two or three points is worth a short paragraph of your effort. A 10-12 point essay (or a question that appears to be about 1/10th of an exam) should prompt around 5 information-filled short paragraphs (also known as the 5-paragraph essay).

How is the essay going to be graded? Essay questions may be graded by one person or by a team of graders. In large college classes, for example, getting help from graduate teaching assistants is the only way for the instructor to keep up with the volume of writing generated by her students. A specific 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 look for certain information to make it 'correct' and subtract points for other reasons, like failure to mention obvious facts. Let me explain what I mean in detail:



- **ADDING POINTS:** You will 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, you lose points. If you include additional incorrect data—even if it was not originally part of the question—you may also lose points even if everything else was correct.
- **CHECKS AND X'S:** It's common to see checks and X's (or some similar counting indicator) in the margins of essay questions graded at the college level. 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. Here at The Lukeion Project, you can't see the checks and X's but we still use a similar system.



POINTERS TO HELP YOU DO BETTER ON AN EXAM ESSAY

1. *Answer the question prompt **completely!***
 - 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. Use a little bit of scrap paper to help you make a quick outline so that you are sure to cover what has been asked.
2. *Be specific*
 - The more general your answer is, 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" or "Caesar was an important Roman" is meaningless and it tells the grader that you are **padding for fluffy filling so you appear to know more than you do**. Such answers only count as non-information plus your instructors will think ill of you. Instead, you might say "The best examples of Minoan art can be found on Crete," or "Caesar was a statesman of the late Roman Republic." Be sure to make all your statements *count by using facts (never feelings nor fluff)*.
3. *Show what you know.*
 - Essay questions are an opportunity to demonstrate your knowledge so use them to your **greatest advantage**. Never wimp out! You haven't been assigned an essay because your instructor wished to see a lame answer.

- Add all details that you can to support the thesis of your response. Details, if they support your answer, get you the check marks that raise your score.

4. *Adding “Fluff” NEVER...EVER... helps your grade.*

- No grader is fooled by fluff and they all have finely tuned *fluff detectors*. Restating the question or sharing your emotional responses to the question (if the question doesn’t ask for them) will gain you no points and will probably annoy the grader – this is *never* a good policy. DON’T pad your answers with non-informative fluff.

Here’s an answer to “Why is Minoan Art Important?”

- **FLUFF:** The reason that Minoan Art is important is that Minoan Art shows up in the places that Minoan people once lived. Their art is breathtaking and lovely. I would love to decorate my own home with Minoan Art. Therefore Minoan Art is important.
 - **There are no stated facts in this essay**
 - **Your grader has just grown more gray hairs.**
- **Not fluff:** Minoan culture was at its highest point at approximately 1600 BC on the island of Crete. The Minoans were remarkable for their skills in metal craft (such as the *bee pendant*), fresco (such as the *bull fresco* at Knossos), and pottery which was decorated with natural themes. Artifacts discovered in Minoan palaces suggest they were influenced by nature, the sea, and Egyptian technology (such as carved stone vessels).
 - **Facts include correct date, correct location, specific examples of Minoan art, and factual observations about the subject.**
 - **Your grader is super happy.**



5. *Make it easy to grade so you can earn full credit.*

- One can express the same information found in a full-credit essay but receive fewer points due to how the essay has been written. What gives? **Organization and clarity will play a role in how well you do.**
 - **NEVER write just one long paragraph...never write any loooooong paragraphs.** Graders have eyes, too! If you collapse everything into one cramped paragraph,

your grader may not bother to go hunting in that glomby tangled mess for all your hard-to-find points and will just give you less credit.

- Create several paragraphs that are each no longer than 5-7 lines long.
- *Space out your facts.* Lists are never acceptable essay responses (unless the question specifically asks you for one) so avoid approximating a list in your essays. Don't pile a bunch of information into one cramped spot:
 - Poor statement of facts:
 - "The Romans were remarkable for their engineering, plumbing, literature, and architecture."
 - Good statement of facts:
 - "The Romans borrowed many of their engineering techniques from other cultures, such as Greece and Egypt. They improved those techniques through their use of plumbing in private houses and public water systems with aqueducts.
The Romans also borrowed techniques from the Greeks when writing their literature and poetry. Similarly, they added their own innovations and improvements. Virgil and Catullus are examples of Roman poets.
Finally, the Romans borrowed architectural techniques from other cultures and improved on them as well. The Pantheon in Rome is a good example of innovation and improvement. It remains a testament today of the Roman use of un-reinforced concrete."
- *Edit your work well once you are done.* Some will lose points because their essay is difficult to read. Who can find the facts through all those typos? Edit your work for spelling and punctuation to ensure that it is easy to read.
- *Go the extra mile.* If you find you have extra time before you must turn in the exam, go back and add more to your essay answer. Even if no bonus points are in store for such efforts (though sometimes there are), a well written essay will leave your instructor with the impression that you are a clever and competent student!
- *Skimpy writers: get over it!* In all our years of grading, we find there is always at least one student in every class who is stubbornly insistent on writing SHORT essays. "I just don't like to write," this student will often whine. Your instructor will pause with a moment of compassion (not) right before he or she gives you a low score on your essay. Do hard things. Write complete and thoughtful essays and then be satisfied with the scores that result. Your choice.

