

## Overview: Answering the Essay & Short Answer Exam Question Well

### What does your professor expect?

Many faculty members include short-and long-answer essay questions as a part of their major exams. What does the faculty member expect from your answer?

1. **Your essay answers the question.** In an essay exam, most professors want more than just the facts. Your grade will be determined by how well you demonstrate your knowledge of the facts and your understanding of those facts in a greater context (*i.e. how these facts affected a period of history, how the introduction of this organism into the ecosystem effects the environment, how this sequence of events led to the development of ...*).

*i.e.*  
PURPOSEFUL . . .  
DIRECTED . . .  
CENTERED . . .  
POINTED

2. **Your answer is well written.** Most professors will look for specific elements when reading an essay exam. These are the building blocks of a good exam essay and include:

**FOCUSED:** Your answer should answer all parts of the question without a lot of random ideas which have little or nothing to do with the question. Students often think that adding random facts or ideas will help improve their grade because they know them. The opposite is true – adding random, unrelated ideas or facts almost always result in the reduction of points from your grade.

*i.e.*  
ORGANIZED . . .  
PLANNED . . .  
TIGHT . . .  
APPROPRIATE . . .  
THOUGHT-OUT

**STRUCTURED:** You know the answer to the question but your ability to communicate that knowledge to your professor depends on how well you structure your answer. Take the time to make a rough outline of what you want to write and in what order you want to present it. Always begin with a “thesis statement” and end with a “conclusion”. Stream of consciousness writing (putting things on paper as you think of them) will result in a mediocre grade at best.

*i.e.*  
TEST RESULTS . . .  
DATA . . .  
PROOFS . . .  
SPECIFICS . . .  
EVIDENCES

**DOCUMENTED:** Contrary to the True/False or Multiple Choice

Question, your essay answer must go beyond a simple statement of fact. The professor is looking for the correct answer, yes, but more importantly, for your understanding of the answer. So, always include relevant facts, figures, examples, and tests (*the phosphate test showed a ph of ...*), etc. With the essay question (short or long), how well you document your answer will often make the difference between an A and B grade.

**WELL PRESENTED:** Students who do not use the accepted rules of English are often thought to be less competent or knowledgeable than those who do. If you have all of the elements of a well-written paper but your use of language, sentence structure, spelling or (in the case of an in-class essay) handwriting make it difficult to read or understand what you are trying to say, your grade will suffer. Make sure you use good sentence structure, grammar, spelling and legible handwriting. These elements will make a good grade better.

*i.e.*

GOOD GRAMMAR . . .

CORRECT SPELLING . . .

NEAT . . .

ORGANIZED . . .

READABLE

### How do I write an effective answer to an essay exam question?

Now that you have a better idea of what your professor expects from you when s/he gives you an essay question, how do you approach the actual writing of your answer?

Most faculty members would agree that there are a number of steps which will help you write an effective essay which demonstrates both your knowledge and understanding of the question.

1. Read through all of the questions carefully making sure you understand each question.
2. In order to manage your time effectively, underline or highlight the key word(s) in each question and decide which questions you feel most confident in answering. These should be the questions you answer first.
3. Circle the action word(s) which tell you how to organize your answer. (*See Prompts & Patterns of Response below.*)
4. Chose the appropriate pattern of response for each action word and outline your answer on scratch paper or in the margins of your examination booklet.
5. Write your answer as quickly and legibly as possible. Don't plan on rewriting your essay – there is rarely enough time to do anything but proof your answer.
6. Start your answer by re-writing the question as a thesis statement. A well-written thesis statement answers the question directly. What remains is to provide the documentation which supports your answer using the material you have studied.
7. Proofread your answer and correct any errors in grammar, spelling or syntax.

## FACULTY PROMPTS & PATTERNS OF RESPONSE

Most essay questions contain an Action Word that you can use to help you organize your response to that question. In general, there are six of these Action Words:

Define / Definition of

Analyze / Analysis of

Cause & Effect

Compare / Contrast

Process Analysis/Describe/List

Supported Opinion (Defend/Refute)

**For the elements and strategies used to answer each type of Short Answer/Essay Question listed above, go to Parts 1 through 6 of this Resource.**

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