

TEST TAKING STRATEGIES: Essay Questions

Four important guidelines to be successful on essay exams:

1. **Budget your exam TIME—**

- Start answering questions easier for you
- Jot down a few ideas before you begin to write
- Note the point-value of each question. You don't want to be spending a lot of time answering a question that is not worth too many points
- Save some time at the end for a quick review

2. **Develop a brief OUTLINE of your answer before you begin to write—**

- This helps you in organizing your essay. Use the first paragraph to lay out your thesis, i.e. to introduce the *main* points of the essay. Use the subsequent paragraphs then to describe each point in detail
- An outline helps you stay focused on the main discussion points and prevents your argument from going astray
- An outline enables you to ensure whether you have answered/covered all the parts of the questions asked
- Instructors usually assign points based on your coverage of main topics from the material read/question asked. So, having at least an outline to provide, even though you may not be able to complete the entire essay if you are running out of time, might help you earn more points. In other words, it might be a better idea to have a clearly laid out outline of the points to be discussed, and discuss all parts of the question briefly than to address just *one* aspect of the question in detail.

3. **Write Concise, Organized answers—**

- Vague answers and answers that tend to ramble on and on are downgraded by instructors. Stick to the question asked
- Read the question properly and try to answer all its parts. A finely written answer that does *not* answer the question properly is of little use to the instructor

4. **Know the Key Words in essay questions—**

- Knowing the key word in an essay question, say “analyze” or “define” or “describe” and so on, will help you answer the question more specifically.

Turn over for a list of key words that you might encounter frequently in essay tests...

Key Words

Analyze: To divide something into its parts in order to understand it better; to show how the parts work together to produce the overall pattern.

Compare: To look at the characteristics or qualities of several things and identify their similarities or differences. Do not just describe the traits; define how the things are alike and how they are different.

Contrast: To identify the differences between things.

Criticize/Critique: To analyze and judge something. Criticism can be positive, negative, or both. A criticism should generally contain your own judgments (supported by evidence) and those of other authorities who can support your point.

Define: To give the meaning of a word or an expression. Giving an example sometimes helps to clarify a definition, but an example by itself is *not* a definition.

Describe: To give a general verbal sketch of something, in narrative or other form.

Discuss: To examine or *analyze* something in a broad and detailed way. Discussion often includes identifying the important questions related to an issue and attempting to answer these questions. A good discussion explores all relevant evidence and information.

Evaluate: To *discuss* the strengths and weaknesses of something. Evaluation is similar to *criticism*, but the word *evaluate* places more stress on the idea of how *well* something meets a certain standard or fulfills some specific purpose.

Explain: To clarify something. Explanations generally focus on why or how something has come about.

Interpret: To *explain* the meaning of something. In science, you might explain what an experiment shows and what conclusions can be drawn from it. In a literature course, you might explain—or interpret—what a poem means beyond the literal meaning of the words.

Justify: To argue in support of some decision or conclusion by showing sufficient evidence or reasons in its favor. Try to support your argument with both logical and concrete examples.

Narrate: To relate a series of events in the order in which they occurred. Generally, you will also be asked to *explain* something about the events you are narrating.

Outline: To present a series of main points in appropriate order. Some instructors want an outline with Roman numerals for main points followed by letters for supporting details. If in doubt, clarify with the instructor whether he or she wants a formal outline.

Prove: To give a convincing logical argument and evidence in support of some statement.

Review: To comment on the main points of a problem or a series of statements. A review question usually also asks you to *evaluate* or *criticize*.

Summarize: To give information in brief form, omitting examples and details. A summary is short yet covers all important points.

Trace: To *narrate* a course of events, drawing connections from one event to the next.