

## Tip Sheet

# Writing Exam Essays

This framework should ideally be worked through with a tutor or teacher.

## What is a well written answer to an essay question?

It is...

### Well Focused

Be sure to answer the question completely, that is, answer all parts of the question. Avoid "padding." A lot of rambling and ranting is a sure sign that the writer doesn't really know what the right answer is and hopes that somehow, something in that overgrown jungle of words was the correct answer.

### Well Organised

Don't write in a haphazard "think-as-you-go" manner. Do some planning and be sure that what you write has a clearly marked introduction which both states the point(s) you are going to make and also, if possible, how you are going to proceed. In addition, the essay should have a clearly indicated conclusion which summarises the material covered and emphasises your thesis or main point.

### Well Supported

Do not just assert something is true, prove it. What facts, figures, examples, tests, etc. prove your point? In many cases, the difference between an A and a B as a grade is due to the effective use of supporting evidence.

## How do you write an effective essay exam?

1. Read through all the questions carefully.
2. Budget your time and decide which question(s) you will answer first.
3. Underline the key word(s) which tell you what to do for each question.
4. Choose an organisational pattern (see over the page) appropriate for each key word and plan your answers on scratch paper or in the margins.
5. Write your answers as quickly and as legibly as you can; do not take the time to recopy.
  - a) Begin each answer with one or two sentence thesis statements which summarise your answer. If possible, rephrase the question's essential terms into a statement (which therefore directly answers the essay question).
  - b) Support your thesis with specific references to the material you have studied.
6. Proofread your answer and correct errors in spelling and mechanics.

## Specific organisational patterns and "key words"

Most essay questions will have one or more "key words" that indicate which organisational pattern you should use in your answer. The six most common organisational patterns for essay exams are definition, analysis, cause and effect, compare/contrast, process analysis, and thesis-support.

## Tip Sheet

## Writing Exam Essays (continued)

## 1. Definition

Typical questions include:	Accommodations	Tools you can use to support your answer
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Define X."</li> <li>• "What is an X?"</li> <li>• "Choose N terms from the following list and define them."</li> </ul>	<p>State the term to be defined.</p> <p>State the class of objects or concepts to which the term belongs.</p> <p>Differentiate the term from other members of the class by listing the term's distinguishing characteristics.</p>	<p>Details which describe the term</p> <p>Examples and incidents</p> <p>Comparisons to familiar terms</p> <p>Negation to state what the term is not</p> <p>Classification (i.e., break it down into parts)</p> <p>Examination of origins or causes</p> <p>Examination of results, effects, or uses</p>
<p><i>For Example:</i></p> <p><b>Q:</b> "What is a fanzine?"</p>	<p><b>A:</b> A fanzine is a magazine written, mimeographed, and distributed by and for science fiction or comic strip enthusiasts.</p>	

## 2. Analysis

Analysis involves breaking something down into its components and discovering the parts that make up the whole.

Typical questions include:	Useful transition words:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Analyse X."</li> <li>• "What are the components of X?"</li> <li>• "What are the five different kinds of X?"</li> <li>• "Discuss the different types of X."</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• first, second, third, etc.</li> <li>• next</li> <li>• another</li> <li>• in addition</li> <li>• moreover</li> </ul>
<p><i>For Example:</i></p> <p><b>Q:</b> "Discuss the different services a junior college offers a community."</p>	<p><b>A:</b> Thesis: A junior college offers the community at least three main types of educational services: vocational education for young people; continuing education for older people; and personal development for all individuals.</p> <p>Outline for supporting details and examples: a) vocational education; b) continuing education; and c) personal development.</p>

## Tip Sheet

## Writing Exam Essays (continued)

Cause and effect involves tracing probable or known effects of a certain cause or examining one or more effects and discussing the reasonable or known cause(s).

## 3. Cause and Effect

Typical questions include:	Useful transition words:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “What are the causes of X?”</li> <li>• “What led to X?”</li> <li>• “Why did X occur?”</li> <li>• “Why does X happen?”</li> <li>• “What would be the effects of X?”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• because</li> <li>• consequently</li> <li>• therefore</li> <li>• for this reason</li> <li>• as a result</li> </ul>
<p><i>For Example:</i> Q: “Define recession and discuss the probable effects a recession would have on today’s society.”</p>	<p><b>A:</b> Thesis: A recession, which is a nationwide lull in business activity, would be detrimental to society in the following ways: it would .....A.....; it would .....B.....; and it would .....C..... . The rest of the answer would explain, in some detail, the three effects: A, B, and C.</p>

## 4. Compare-Contrast

Typical questions include:	Useful transition words:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “How does X differ from Y?”</li> <li>• “Compare X and Y.”</li> <li>• “What are the advantages and disadvantages of X and Y?”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• on the other hand</li> <li>• similarly</li> <li>• unlike A, B ...</li> <li>• in the same way</li> <li>• but</li> <li>• yet</li> <li>• though</li> <li>• while both A and B are ..., only B ...</li> <li>• nevertheless</li> <li>• on the contrary</li> <li>• despite</li> <li>• however</li> <li>• conversely</li> <li>• while A is ..., B is ...</li> </ul>		
<p><i>For Example:</i> Q: “Which would you rather own - a compact car or a full-sized car?”</p>	<p><b>A:</b> Thesis: I would own a compact car rather than a full-sized car for the following reasons: .....A.....; .....B.....; .....C.....; and .....D..... .</p> <p>Two patterns of development:</p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td style="vertical-align: top;"> <p><b>Pattern 1</b> <i>Compact car</i> <b>1.</b> Advantages <b>2.</b> Disadvantages</p> <p><i>Full-sized car</i> <b>1.</b> Advantages <b>2.</b> Disadvantages</p> </td> <td style="vertical-align: top;"> <p><b>Pattern 2</b> <i>Advantages</i> <b>1.</b> Full-sized car <b>2.</b> Compact car</p> <p><i>Disadvantages</i> <b>1.</b> Full-sized car <b>2.</b> Compact car</p> </td> </tr> </table>	<p><b>Pattern 1</b> <i>Compact car</i> <b>1.</b> Advantages <b>2.</b> Disadvantages</p> <p><i>Full-sized car</i> <b>1.</b> Advantages <b>2.</b> Disadvantages</p>	<p><b>Pattern 2</b> <i>Advantages</i> <b>1.</b> Full-sized car <b>2.</b> Compact car</p> <p><i>Disadvantages</i> <b>1.</b> Full-sized car <b>2.</b> Compact car</p>
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## Tip Sheet

## Writing Exam Essays (continued)

This involves giving directions or telling the reader how to do something. It may involve discussing some complex procedure as a series of discrete steps. The organisation is almost always chronological.

## 5. Process

Typical questions include:	Useful transition words:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Describe how X is accomplished."</li> <li>• "List the steps involved in X."</li> <li>• "Explain what happened in X."</li> <li>• "What is the procedure involved in X?"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• first, second, third, etc.</li> <li>• next</li> <li>• then</li> <li>• following this</li> <li>• finally</li> <li>• after, afterwards, after this</li> <li>• subsequently</li> <li>• simultaneously, concurrently</li> </ul>
<p><i>For Example:</i> Q: "According to Richard Bolles' What Colour is your Parachute?, what is the best procedure for finding a job?"</p>	<p><b>A:</b> In <i>What Colour Is Your Parachute?</i>, Richard Bolles lists seven steps that all job-hunters should follow: .....A....., .....B....., .....C....., .....D....., .....E....., .....F....., and .....G.....</p> <p>The remainder of the answer should discuss each of these seven steps in some detail.</p>

## 6. Thesis and Support

Thesis and support involves stating a clearly worded opinion or interpretation and then defending it with data, examples, facts, and so on that you can draw from the material you have studied.

Typical questions include:	Useful transition words:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Discuss X."</li> <li>• "A noted authority has said X. Do you agree or disagree?"</li> <li>• "Defend or refute X."</li> <li>• "Do you think that X is valid? Defend your position."</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• therefore</li> <li>• for this reason</li> <li>• it follows that</li> <li>• as a result</li> <li>• because</li> <li>• however</li> <li>• consequently</li> </ul>
<p><i>For Example:</i> Q: "Despite criticism, television is useful because it aids in the socialising process of our children."</p>	<p><b>A:</b> Television hinders rather than helps in the socialising process of our children because .....A....., .....B....., and .....C.....</p> <p>The rest of the answer is devoted to developing arguments A, B, and C.</p>

## Tip Sheet

**Writing Exam Essays (continued)****Tips for Writing Essay Exams****Before the Exam: Prepare and Practise**

Writing a good essay requires synthesis of material that cannot be done in the 20-30 minutes you have during the exam. In the days before the exam, you should:

- **Anticipate test questions.** Look at the question from the last exam. Did the question ask you to apply a theory to historical or contemporary events? Did you have to compare/contrast theories? Did you have to prove an argument? Imagine yourself in the role of the instructor-what did the instructor emphasise? What are the big ideas in the course?
- **Practise writing.** You may decide to write a summary of each theory you have been discussing, or a short description of the historical or contemporary events you've been studying. Focus on clarity, conciseness, and understanding the differences between the theories.
- **Memorise key events, facts, and names.**  
You will have to support your argument with evidence, and this may involve memorising some key events, or the names of theorists, etc. Use memory tricks such as creating a rhyme or mnemonic (e.g. the mnemonic *Kids Prefer Cheese Over Fried Green Spinach* can aide recall of the order of taxonomy in Biology: Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus, Species).
- **Organise your ideas.** Knowledge of the subject matter is only part of the preparation process. You need to spend some time thinking about how to organise your ideas. Let's say the question asks you to compare and contrast what regime theory and hegemonic stability theory would predict about post-cold war nuclear proliferation. The key components of an answer to this question must include:
  - A definition of the theories
  - A brief description of the issue
  - A comparison of the two theories' predictions
  - A clear and logical contrasting of the theories (noting how and why they are different).

**In the exam**

Many students start writing furiously after scanning the essay question. Do not do this! Instead, try the following:

- **Perform a "memory dump."** Write down all the information you have had to memorise for the exam in note form.
- **Read the questions and instructions carefully.** Read over all the questions on the exam. If you simply answer each question as you encounter it, you may give certain information or evidence to one question that is more suitable for another. Be sure to identify all parts of the question.
- **Formulate a thesis that answers the question.** You can use the wording from the question. There is not time for an elaborate introduction, but be sure to introduce the topic, your argument, and how you will support your thesis (do this in your first paragraph).
- **Organise your supporting points.** Before you proceed with the body of the essay, write an outline that summarises your main supporting points. Check to make sure you are answering all parts of the question. Coherent organisation is one of the most important characteristics of a good essay.

## Tip Sheet

**Writing Exam Essays (continued)**

- **Make a persuasive argument.** Most essays in political science ask you to make some kind of argument. While there are no answers, there are more and less persuasive answers. What makes an argument persuasive?
  - A clear point that is being argued (a thesis)
  - Sufficient evidence to support that thesis
  - Logical progression of ideas throughout the essay.
- **Review your essay.** Take a few minutes to re-read your essay. Correct grammatical mistakes; check to see that you have answered all parts of the question.

**Things to Avoid**

Essay exams can be stressful. You may draw a blank, run out of time, or find that you neglected an important part of the course in studying for the test. Of course, good preparation and time management can help you avoid these negative experiences. Some things to keep in mind as you write your essay include the following:

- **Avoid excuses**  
Don't write at the end that you ran out of time, or did not have time to study because you were sick. Make an appointment with your teacher to discuss these things after the exam.
- **Don't "pad" your answer**  
Instructors are usually quite adept at detecting student bluffing. They give no credit for elaboration of the obvious. If you are stuck, you can elaborate on what you do know, as long as it relates to the question.
- **Avoid the "kitchen sink" approach**  
Many students simply write down everything they know about a particular topic, without relating the information to the question. Everything you include in your answer should help to answer the question and support your thesis. You need to show how/why the information is relevant - don't leave it up to your instructor to figure this out!

This information sheet has been adapted from the Purdue University Online Writing Lab.  
[owl.english.purdue.edu](http://owl.english.purdue.edu)