Answering Essay Questions

Essay exams are designed to test not only the facts and information covered in a course but also the writer’s ability to construct a clear, organized, well-supported response. The writer is often asked to synthesize and to evaluate rather than to simply recall facts.

The following steps may prove useful when answering essay questions:

1. **Read the question carefully, making sure you understand exactly what is being asked.** Be sure to read the entire exam and directions.

2. **Seek clues to the answers in the questions.** These clues often predict what your answer should be. Look at the verbs in the question—“discuss,” “list,” “cite,” “analyze,” “compare,” “evaluate,” etc. Also, look at the nouns—“main features,” “the significance of,” “which of three positions,” etc. In addition, you may find clear clues on how to organize your answer to the question.

3. **Make an idea sheet.** Jot down facts, ideas, and specifics you learned during the course and which are relevant to the question asked. Do this quickly and without making judgments about which will be most helpful and/or most convincing. Sort the ideas later.

4. **Budget your time.** Consider the possible number of points awarded for each question and which are easy and which more difficult. Allocate a specific amount of time for each question, but not necessarily equal time for each. Don’t plan to spend twenty minutes on an item worth only five points but only ten minutes on an item worth twenty points.

5. **Order your responses.** Usually, it’s best to answer the easiest question first because you can do it quickly, and it may save time. However, sometimes you may want to answer the most difficult question first because you know the most about it, especially if the more difficult questions are worth more points.

6. **Compose your response.** Try a mental run through—“First I will..., then I will..., and finally I will...” The introductory paragraph should directly answer the question; turning the question into a statement will often achieve this. Begin with a clearly stated thesis that answers the question and indicates the direction and organization of your response. Supporting paragraphs need topic sentences and must contain concrete evidence as support—dates, names, concepts, numbers, quotes, book or story titles, etc. Also, try to incorporate specific terms used in the course. Leave space between your answers for any additions which may occur to you while answering other questions or while reviewing your answers.

**Key Words Used in Essay Questions:**
- **Define:** Give the exact meaning of the topic. How is it different from everything else of its type?
- **Describe:** Tell what happened or what the topic is. Concentrate only on the primary or most important features.
- **Discuss/Explain:** Tell the main reasons why the topic happened or happens.
- **Illustrate:** Provide one or more examples, relating each to the topic.
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Relate: Tell how the topic had an effect on something else; show the connection(s) between two things.

Trace: List a series of important steps in the development of a historical event, process or sequence of events.

Compare: Give examples of and explain how two things are both alike and different.

Contrast: Give examples of and explain only the differences between two things.

Agree/Disagree: State your opinion about the topic. You must express either a positive or a negative opinion.

Analyze: Identify the parts of the topic and explain how those parts relate to each other and to the topic as a whole.

Critique: Separate the topic into its parts (analyze), and explain the meaning. Give your opinion on the subject.

Evaluate: Avoid debating the issue but assess the good/bad, weak/strong, effective/ineffective, etc. aspects of the topic. You may make both positive and negative points, but you must come to a conclusion about the relative weight of good and bad points.

Interpret: Explain the meaning of the topic. Give facts and/or examples to support your interpretation.

Justify/Prove: Provide reasons and examples to support assertions.

Sample Essay Questions
1. Define “feedback” and relate it to the idea of effective communication.

2. “Acid rain” is a phenomenon we have become aware of in the last twenty-five years. Explain the effects of acid rain on the environment.

3. Discuss how the ideas of marriage and property are interwoven with Edna’s inability to cope with the burden of her life in Kate Chopin’s The Awakening.

4. Compare the characters of Jim and Pap in Mark Twain’s novel The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.

5. Many literary scholars argue that Henry James is one of the greatest writers. Do you agree or disagree? Support your answer with evidence from his works.

6. Explain how the word “bildungsroman” applies to young adult literature.

7. Describe the love triangle between Antony, Cleopatra, and Fulvia in Shakespeare’s play Antony and Cleopatra.

8. Compare the characters of Hamlet and Laertes in Shakespeare’s play The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark.