



# THE WRITING PROCESS

## Preparing for an Essay Examination

As a college student, you will often be faced with a variety of essay exams, from the short-answer essays of a few sentences to take-home exams which may require hours of planning and writing. Remember that essay exams require a comprehensive understanding of large amounts of information. Since exam questions can reach so far and wide into the course materials—and in such unpredictable ways—you cannot hope to do well on them if you are not keeping up with readings and assignments from the beginning of the course.

### HOW TO PREPARE

Below are some tips to help prepare for an essay examination.

- First of all, do the reading, go to the lectures, take careful notes, participate in discussion sections and organize small study groups with classmates to explore and review course materials throughout the semester.
- As the exam approaches, find out what you can about the form it will take. Ask your instructor whether the questions will require short or long answers, how many questions there will be, whether you may choose which questions to answer, and what kinds of thinking and writing will be required of you.
- Try to avoid simply memorizing information aimlessly. As you study, you should be clarifying the important issues of the course and using these issues to focus your understanding of the specific facts and particular readings.
- Try to place all that you have learned into perspective, into a meaningful context. How do the pieces fit together? What fundamental ideas have the readings, the lectures, and the discussions seem to emphasize? How can those ideas help you to digest the information the course has covered?
- One good way to prepare yourself for an exam is by making up questions you think the instructor might give and then planning answers with classmates.
- Returning to your notes and to the assigned readings with specific questions in mind can help enormously in your process of understanding.
- It is helpful to remember that an essay exam tests more than your memory of specific information. You will often be asked to analyze and draw relationships between various texts, theories, or concepts that have been covered throughout the semester. You may even be presented with a text, theory, or concept that you have not seen before, and asked to discuss or analyze it in the context of the course materials with which you are already familiar.
- Of most importance, read the exam carefully. Before you answer a single question, read the entire exam and apportion your time realistically. Careful time management is crucial to your success on essay exams; giving some time to each question is always better than using up your time on only a few and never getting to the others.

Following are categories of exam questions, divided according to the sort of writing task involved.

**Define or identify:** Some questions require you to write a few sentences defining or identifying material from readings or lectures. Almost always such questions allow you only a few minutes to complete your answer.

**Recall details of a specific source:** Sometimes instructors will ask for straightforward summary or paraphrase of a specific source – a report, for example, or a book or film. Such questions hold the students to recounting details directly from the source and do not encourage interpretation or evaluation.

**Explain the importance or significance:** Another kind of essay exam question asks students to explain the importance or significance of something covered in the course. Such questions require you to use specific examples as the basis for a more general discussion of what has been studied. This will often involve interpreting a literary work by concentrating on a particular aspect of it.

**Comment on a quotation:** On essay exams, instructors will often ask students to comment on quotations they are seeing for the first time. Usually such quotations will express some surprising or controversial opinion that complements or challenges basic principles or ideas in the course. Sometimes the writer being quoted is identified, sometimes not. In fact, it is not unusual for instructors to write the quotation themselves.

**Compare and contrast:** One of the most favored essay exam questions is one which requires a comparison or contrast of the two or three principles, ideas, works, activities, or phenomena. This kind of question requires you to explore fully the relations between things of importance in the course, to analyze each thing separately, and then search out specific points of likeness or difference.

**Synthesize information from various sources:** In a course with several assigned readings, an instructor may give students an essay exam question which requires them to pull together (to synthesize) information from all the readings.

**Summarize and explain causes and results:** In humanities and social science courses much of what students study concerns the causes or results of trends, actions, and events. Therefore, it is not too surprising to find questions about causes and results on your exam. Sometimes the instructor expects students to recall causes or results from readings and lectures. At other times, the instructor may not have in mind any particular causes or results and wants to find out what students are able to propose.

**Criticize or evaluate:** Occasionally instructors will invite students to evaluate a concept or work. Nearly always, they want more than opinion: they expect a reasoned, documented judgment based on appropriate criteria. Such questions not only test students' ability to recall and synthesize pertinent information; they also allow instructors to find out whether students can apply criteria taught in the course: whether they understand the standards of judgment that are basic to the subject matter.