

## THE ESSAY EXAM

Online: [www.ufv.ca/writing\\_centre](http://www.ufv.ca/writing_centre)

### Consider the purpose:

Essay exams (or exams with large writing components) are assigned in many courses across a wide range of disciplines. While specific requirements and expectations will vary across faculties and fields of knowledge, your instructor's purpose in assigning an essay exam is two-fold:

- To allow you to demonstrate your knowledge of course material and its relationships to big questions, trends, or debates in the field.
- To allow you to demonstrate your ability to communicate this information in a clear and concise manner using terms appropriate to your discipline.

### Before the exam:

Review material, especially specialized vocabulary. Draw together significant themes discussed in the course. Sketch out historical periods or the relationships between ideas. Revisit your outline and course objectives – these should provide you with a blueprint for the relationships between materials covered in the course.

### During the exam:

**Manage your time** by reading over the whole exam before you start and deciding how much time you're going to spend on each question. Break each question down to decide how much time you have for planning, writing, and proofreading. Stick to your time plan.

**Manage the format.** If you are answering in an exam booklet, write on one side of the page only and double space your answer. This format gives you plenty of space to add to or change your answer in the proofreading stage.

**Decide what the question is asking.** Read the question carefully and slowly and several times if need be. Essay questions usually contain key words that give you specific clues about what is required to answer the question fully. Underline and number these words so that you are sure you do everything you are asked to do. A list of these words and their definitions appear on page two of this handout.

**Plan your response.** First, think of what points you wish to cover. Make a list of “cue words” in the margin. Organize them in the order you wish to discuss them. This will serve as an outline and help you to write a well-organized answer.

**Write your response.** Aim for clear, concise writing. Once you have established the introductory sentence, the rest of the answer should fall into place. Be sure to define key terms. Support your topic sentence with facts, figures, dates and quotes. Often the difference between a good answer and a mediocre one is the lack of supporting details.

**Be precise.** Have the courage to delete excess words that hinder the clear answer. Simply say what you feel is necessary; don't add more because it is a short answer. Often short answers are the best.

**Proofread carefully.** Make changes or add information in the blank areas that you have left in your exam booklet – the opposite page and the areas between lines of your writing. Check for punctuation, spelling, and grammatical errors. Read over the questions again to make sure you have covered them.

## GLOSSARY OF KEY EXAM TERMS

**Compare and Contrast:** **Compare** means to point out similarities and difference, e.g., *she compared two books to see which one had the better bibliography*. Compare is commonly used in two senses: to point out likenesses, and to examine both similarities and differences. **Contrast** means to point out differences or dissimilarities. When you are asked to compare and/or contrast items, check with your instructor to clarify usage.

There are two common structures to manage this kind of a question: *block* and *point-by-point*. *Block* format discusses one item completely before moving onto the next item. *Point-by-point* format moves back and forth between items being compared. It is important to make sure that your essay is equally weighted. For example, if you are asked to compare/contrast two articles about the French resistance during the Second World War, you will be expected to examine how both authors treat this subject, e.g., how are their arguments, writing styles, uses of evidence, etc., different? How are they similar?

**Critique:** To critically examine, that is, to make an informed, careful judgement and evaluation about the merit (or truth)? Of the factors mentioned. Give the results of your analysis of these factors, discussing their strengths and limitations as well as evidence for these positions.

For example, in a literature review you might be asked to access the strengths and weaknesses of the literature you are reading on a given topic.

**Define:** To give a concise, clear, authoritative (or formal) meaning of something, such as a term or a concept. In such statements, details are not required, but boundaries or limitations which indicate context should be briefly mentioned. For example, in a psychology exam you may be asked to define the term "variable." You will need to define it according to its use in psychology and to distinguish it from similar or related terms.

**Describe:** To tell in detail about something, that is, to explain, recount, characterize, sketch or relate in narrative or story form, the features, nature or quality of something. For example, if you are asked to describe an experience, you will use detail to depict or relate the story.

**Diagram:** To draw a graph, chart, or drawing. Be sure to label it and add a brief explanation of it, if needed.

**Discuss:** Give details and, if relevant, the positive and negative points of a subject as well as evidence for these positions. Can also include analyzing, examining, and discussing pros and cons.

**Enumerate:** To name and number points, one by one, as in a list.

**Explain/Explicate:** To give reasons for something, i.e., to provide the "hows," "whys," "whats" etc. To develop the meaning or implication of something by logically analyzing and explaining. Provide as much information as you can to clarify and interpret your ideas for your reader.

**Evaluate:** To give the positive and negative points and your opinion of a subject as well as your judgement about which outweighs the other and why.

**Illustrate:** Explain by giving examples. Use a figure, picture, diagram, or concrete example.

**Interpret:** Translate, give examples of, solve, or comment on a subject usually giving your judgement about it.

**Justify:** Means to give a statement of why you think it is so. Provide reasons for your statement or conclusion.

**List:** Means to produce a numbered list of words, sentences, or comments. Same as enumerate.

**Outline:** Means to give a general summary. It should contain a series of main ideas supported by secondary ideas. Show the organization of the ideas. Omit minor details.

**Prove:** Establish that something is true by citing factual evidence or giving clear, logical reasons.

**Relate:** Means to show the connections between things, telling how one causes or is like another.

**State:** Means to describe the main points in precise terms. Be formal. Use brief, clear sentences. Details and illustrations may be omitted.

**Summarize:** Means to give a brief, condensed account of the main ideas. Omit details and examples.

**Trace:** You are to give a description of progress, historical sequence, or development from a point or origin. Such descriptions may call for explanations and/or interpretations.



***The Writing Centre at the University of the Fraser Valley***

- *promotes and researches writing as a foundational activity connected to critical thinking and learning in a post-secondary setting,*
- *provides a confidential service offering writing instruction to students who wish to become effective writers in their fields of study, and*
- *engages in dialogue with UFV's community of learners about the teaching of writing in discipline areas.*

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