

Prepare from Day One

Regular studying throughout the semester is one of the best ways to prepare for a successful essay exam. Review your lecture and text notes regularly - once a week or every two weeks will help to keep the content fresh in your mind. Learn to recognize your strengths and weaknesses with particular concepts in the course to provide a direction and focus for studying.

Pre-exam Strategies

Begin preparing several weeks before the exam. There are several options for practicing essay exam writing:

1. Predict questions that you think may be on the exam and practice answering them, giving yourself a limited time. Ask a classmate to critique your answer.
2. Get old midterms if possible from friends who've taken the course in an earlier semester, or someone in your program in a higher year. Sometimes an instructor may have an old exam on file that you can use.
3. Arrange a study group to discuss possible essay questions and key issues or concepts from the course. Choose members of your group carefully, to ensure that everyone will be motivated to participate. To make group study even more effective, everyone should be at about the same point in their preparation for the exam.
4. Most instructors offer extra reading to complement the primary course readings or textbook. Don't be intimidated by long supplemental reading lists. Using a technique like [SQ4R](#) can help you glean the main ideas from a book in a very short time. The resources on the course reading list can be particularly useful for enhancing your understanding of difficult texts or course concepts.
5. Know your instructor's area of expertise and make a point of reading his/her research if it's relevant to the course.
6. Concept mapping is a method of visualizing and making connections between the major concepts in a course. Draw a diagram of the major topics from both the lectures and the course readings, looking for links

and similarities you may not have noticed before. From there, link minor ideas to the major topics and see how many crossovers and linkages you can discover.

Special Situations

The instructor gives the questions or areas of study to the class ahead of time:

In this case, research the given questions from your text and lecture notes and prepare outlines for your answers on paper ahead of time. It's a good idea to select a few questions to answer in full.

The essay exam is a take-home exam:

In this situation you have some time to practice your answers. Use the same study techniques as if you were going to write the exam on campus. Don't leave your studying until you receive the take-home exam, or you may spend all your time researching the material instead of writing the paper.

During the Exam

1. Read the instructions carefully, noting how many questions you need to answer in each section. Essay exams often include a choice of questions; don't waste time by doing more than required!
2. Process the question to ensure you know how to answer it. For example, are you being asked to analyze, compare and contrast, or discuss? Each requires a different approach.
3. Read all the questions on the exam before you begin writing. Make a brief outline for the questions you plan to answer. This is very important to do for an exam, even if you don't normally use an outline when writing essays. Sometimes your best ideas could be used in more than one answer. You don't want to start writing and then later discover that your discussion of imagery in Hamlet would have fit better in the question on Shakespeare's imagery than the question on Hamlet.
4. Calculate the amount of time available for each question depending on how many marks it is worth. Try and stick to your time plan - it's usually better to

have something for each question, even if it's incomplete, rather than nothing at all. If you run out of time to finish a question, jot down the rest of your ideas in point form. Your instructor may give partial credit for your ideas.

5. Leave enough time to re-read your paper at the end of the exam when you have some objectivity and distance from your writing.

Want more information?

The Counselling Department is the best source for advice and information on issues related to learning, studying, time management, and academic performance.

Workshops on learning, studying, etc., are offered regularly each semester by the Counselling Department. Please contact Student Services at Abbotsford - 604-854-4528 (B 214) or Chilliwack - 604-795-2808 (E 105) to make an appointment.

Study Skills Tip Sheets providing information on many learning and time management topics, as well as writing and referencing, are available free to students. The complete range of Study Skills Tip Sheets is available on-line at www.ufv.ca/counselling/study/.

Links to Resources Elsewhere:

An article on Writing Essay Exams from Colgate University at:

<http://departments.colgate.edu/diw/essayexam.html>
York University's Preparing for Essay Style Exams

at:

http://www.english.uiuc.edu/cws/wworkshop/writer_resources/writing_tips/standardized_essay_exams.htm

Other Relevant Study Skills Tip Sheets:

Preparing for Exams
Multiple Choice Exams

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