1. Essay Exam Basics

About essay questions
Essay questions test your depth of knowledge and critical thinking. Called "think" or "discussion" questions, they often require you to make accurate generalizations about a concept and then support them with specific evidence. You might have to evaluate specific situations and identify the principle or concept they represent.

Short answer questions test your ability to present brief explanations backed up by facts. A sample short answer question in a literature course may be, "In a well-organized paragraph, explain Poe's theory of poetry." In a history course you might be asked to list the major provisions of a treaty and briefly explain the significance of each one.

Preparing for an essay exam
Preparation for an essay test requires in-depth review that is best done throughout the semester. But even if it is later in the term, try to give yourself a solid chunk of time to prepare. This involves reading and reviewing textbook chapters and lecture notes, creating study guides or summary sheets, preparing practice test questions, and/or completing study guides provided by your professor.

Study connections between ideas. Your instructor is not looking for a collection of unrelated pieces of information; he or she wants to see that you understand the whole picture, i.e., how the generalizations or concepts create the framework for the specific facts, and how the examples or details fill in the gaps. So, when studying, try to think about how the information fits together.
When studying, don’t just read; write about what you’ve read. Even pausing every 20 minutes and writing for five will help your comprehension and memory.

Prepare practice questions. Try to prepare for questions that are likely to be asked. If your instructor has given you the questions themselves or a study sheet in advance, practice answering those questions. Otherwise, try to anticipate questions your instructor is likely to ask and practice those. At the very least, outline how you would answer the test questions; however, it’s better to actually write out the answers. That way, you’ll know where you need to study more.

2. Preparation Steps

**STEP ONE: Anticipation**
Anticipate questions that are likely to be on the test. Use previous tests and your class notes as your basic source material for the following three steps:

- Ask yourself, “What are the concepts and relationships involved in the material I am reviewing?” Review your notes, omitting detail, for the time being. Review major headings and chapter summaries in your textbook(s) or readings.
- Boil down your material into a concise outline.
- Add the necessary details to the main concepts in your outline.

**STEP TWO: Condensation**
Organize your material by identifying all major concepts, the subordinate concepts, and all important details. This can be in outline form. Then, create written summaries in your own words.

**STEP THREE: Practice**
Create sample test questions and practice answering them. This is an excellent strategy to use with a study group or with a study partner. You can also practice outlining answers to practice questions.

**NB:** The University of Toronto has a site where you can access past exams that might be used for practice. You can find them if you go to the University of Toronto Libraries home page, click on “Students” and then click on “Exams and Course Collections.” You can also find them on the Portal under “Hot Spots.”

3. Taking the essay exam

Many principles for writing good out-of-class essays also apply to in-class essays. For example, both kinds of essay are more successful when you take into consideration your purpose, audience and information; when you develop a thesis with support; when you prove your assertions with evidence; when you guide your readers with transitions, etc.
Yet there are differences. The most important is purpose. Usually, for example, you write a research paper to learn more about a selected topic but write essay exams to demonstrate your knowledge. You are not only conveying information, but also proving to your audience—the examiner—that you have mastered the information and can work with it. In short, your purpose is both informative and persuasive. Keeping this purpose in mind will help you both prepare for and write the essay.

Again, while you’re taking the exam, remember that it’s not simply what you say or how much you say, but how you say it that’s important.

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

Breathe! Take a moment to close your eyes, put both feet on the ground, and take a deep breath. It is not a time waster, but will help you relax and focus.

Read the questions and instructions thoroughly. Take a few minutes before writing your essay to read the question carefully and determine exactly what you are being asked to do. Most essay exam questions, or “prompts,” are carefully worded and contain specific instructions about what you are to write about as well as how you should organize your answer. A glossary of possible prompt terms follows below.

Plan your time. Although you will be working under pressure, take a few minutes to organize your time. Determine how many minutes you can devote to each answer, if there is more than one and they vary in length. You will want to allot most of your time to the questions that are worth the most points, perhaps answering those questions first. On the other hand, you might want to answer first the questions for which you are best prepared.

Formulate a thesis that answers the question and can be defended. Often, you can turn the questions stated or implied on the exam into an answer and use it as your thesis. There is no 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).

Organize your supporting points. Before proceeding with the body of the essay, sketch an outline that summarizes your main supporting points. Use this to help you stay on topic. In an exam, it’s easy to forget points if you don’t write them down. Check to make sure you are answering all parts of the question. Coherent organization is one of the most important characteristics of a good essay.

Write out your essay using good writing techniques. Remember, essay exams are like other essays, so use the same good writing strategies you use for other kinds of writing. Keep in mind that your purpose is to persuade your reader you know the material. Support generalizations with concrete evidence, relevant facts, and specific details that will convince your reader your thesis is valid. Make your main points stand out by writing distinct paragraphs and indicating the relationship between them with transitions.

Finally, sum up your argument with a brief conclusion that lends your essay a clear sense of closure.

Finish by proofreading your answer. Reserve a few minutes after completing your essay to proofread it carefully. First, make sure you stick to the question. Always answer exactly the question asked without digressing. If you find you have digressed, neatly cross out the words or
paragraphs. It’s better to cross out a paragraph that is irrelevant (and to replace it with a relevant one if you have time) than to allow it to stand. In this context at least, quality is always preferable to quantity. Also check sentence structure, spelling and punctuation.

4. Things to Avoid

Essay exams can be stressful. You may draw a blank, run out of time, or find 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:

- **Plan, don’t cram.** Material learned in last-minute study sessions stays in the memory a short time. (So if you cram for a mid-term, you have to learn the material all over again for the final!) Give yourself plenty of time to study and prepare for your exam.

- **Don’t “fudge” or “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 “memory dump” 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!

A Short Glossary of Common Prompts for Essay Exams

**Compare:** Examine two or more ideas, topics, people, etc. and note similarities and differences

**Contrast:** Compare to highlight differences

**Critique:** Judge and discuss strengths and weaknesses

**Explain:** Make the meaning clear and provide reasons

**Define:** Explain the meaning or identify the nature or essential qualities

**Describe:** Convey the nature and attributes of something

**Discuss:** Examine carefully and look at all sides of an idea, problem or subject

**Interpret:** Provide the meaning by paraphrase, translation or explanation

**Justify/Prove:** Defend a statement, decision or conclusion

**Illustrate:** Explain or clarify using specific examples to show connections

**Summarize:** Briefly explain important ideas omitting details

**Outline:** Provide a general sketch of main points and essential details

**Trace:** Show the sequence and development of ideas or events

**Analyze:** Look at the components to show how something works or what it means

**Evaluate/Assess:** Consider pros and cons; give an opinion with reasons and examples