

No. 44: Taking Essay Exams

Unlike multiple choice exams, which tend to emphasize memorization of facts, essay exams more frequently test for critical thinking and intellectual organization. They can be quite nerve-wracking for students in that there is no “clear cut” answer that can be given. Grading them can also be difficult for professors as there is much more subjectivity in an essay answer as compared to a multiple-choice answer. Nonetheless, essay exams are not completely subjective and most professors and teaching assistants are quite skilled in identifying what constitutes a “good” answer. Learning how to manage essay exams so that you can give a good answer is a skill that takes time to develop. Practice makes perfect, as they say. But until you reach perfection, here are a few ideas to help you write a good exam.

- **Sleep on it.** Essay exams test your ability to think critically and connect ideas and concepts. A tired brain cannot do this as effectively as a rested brain. Get an adequate amount of sleep before any exam, be it essay or multiple choice.
- **Study ahead of time.** Cramming the night before does not improve critical thinking. It only helps for short-term memory. Remember, most essay exams do not test for memorization (though knowing your “facts” is important). Consult Dr. T’s Helpful Hints #107 – Studying for Exams – for advice on developing good exam study skills.
- **Confidence.** Stress and tension can be good motivators in moderate doses. However, extreme stress paralyzes. If you have studied adequately, walk into the exam room with confidence. In fact, pause before walking in the door, take a deep breath, and tell yourself you know the material. (Alternatively, if you haven’t put much effort into studying, there is no need to worry because you should know that you probably won’t do well anyways. For those of you who think you can get away with minimal studying, your bad habits will someday catch up to you. Trust me.)
- **Big Picture.** Related to the above point, realize that in college an exam is just an exam. One bad exam will not sink your academic career. The stakes for any single class are pretty low as well. This is unlike the professional world where screwing up a project can mean termination. Take failure in stride, learn from your mistakes and continually try to improve your performance.
- **How much to write?** This is a difficult question to answer. The simple answer is write enough to answer the question. That probably doesn’t help you much. But look at it this way: Do not include any information that is irrelevant to the question at hand. Most professors do not want an essay wherein the student writes everything she knows. Rather, the professor typically wants a well-reasoned, precise response.



- **Back to basics.** The art of writing an essay exam is the same as the art of writing a term paper. You should start with an introduction that somehow restates (or frames) the question being asked and provides a concise thesis statement (i.e., your fundamental answer to the question). Each paragraph should contain one central idea, and that central idea should always be connected back to the main thesis in some manner. Paragraphs should transition smoothly between one another (i.e., the thought of one paragraph should lead logically to the next, or provide a short justification why there is a break in the train of thought). Your essay should conclude with a conclusion that summarizes your thought process.
- **You vs. Everyone Else.** Some essay questions will merely demand that you summarize the readings/lectures in a logical fashion. Others will ask for your opinion (i.e., where you stand on an argument). For the latter, be sure you set your opinion up against others (namely, the authors that you read or your professor). Provide a logical reason for why you hold that position and offer some evidence.



- **A good answer.** Although all professors are different, my experience is that most professors first and foremost want to see a basic understanding of course material. That is probably enough to earn you a C (provided you really do understand the material). To move up to a B or A, you need to show that you can connect material in the course that are not explicitly connected in the readings or lecture. Can you discuss the lecture and bring evidence and theories from the readings that weren't discussed in class to bear upon your answer? If so, you are probably doing a good job. Can you stake a position on a debate between two authors or state your position relative to your professor's? And can you offer evidence to back up your claim? If so, then you are well on your way to a great grade.

- **Don't Cheat.** You may or may not get caught, but if you develop a habit of cheating this will carry on with you for the rest of your life. The problem is that most professions do not tolerate laziness and dishonesty (that is what cheating is). And you only hurt yourself by not finding out what your true limits are.
- **Appealing.** Given the modestly subjective nature* of grading an exam, mistakes may be made. However, only appeal a grade if you think you have reasonable grounds. Getting into law school or staying off academic probation are not intrinsically good reasons to ask for a higher grade. If you do think the grade is incorrect, address all the comments (if any) that are provided by your grader. Type up a written appeal (and check it for spelling and grammar). Get that appeal to your professor within a few days of receiving your graded exam. Taking these steps will make you look professional and may make you realize where you did make a mistake.

LEGAL DISCLAIMER: "Dr. T's Helpful Hints" are only suggested practices and do not guarantee academic success. You are responsible for making the choices that determine how well you do in school. Choose wisely.

* Grading essays is much less subjective than most students think. Having read hundreds and hundreds of essays, it becomes very clear what are good answers and which ones just stink.