

The Essay Exam

Organization and neatness have merit

**How dangerous can
false reasoning prove**
Antigone/Sophocles
Greek

Before writing out the exam:

Set up a time schedule

to answer each question and to review/edit all questions

- If six questions are to be answered in sixty minutes, allow yourself only seven minutes for each
- If questions are "weighted", prioritize that into your time allocation for each question
- When the time is up for one question, stop writing, leave space, and begin the next question. The incomplete answers can be completed during the review time
- Six incomplete answers will usually receive more credit than three, complete ones

Read through the questions once and note if you have any choice in answering questions

- Pay attention to how the question is phrased, or to the "directives", or words such as "compare", "contrast", "criticize", etc. See their definitions in "[Essay terms](#)"
- Answers will come to mind immediately for some questions

Write down their key words, listings, etc, as they are fresh in mind. Otherwise these ideas may be blocked (or be unavailable) when the time comes to write the later questions. This will reduce "clutching" or panic (anxiety, actually fear which disrupts thoughts).

Before attempting to answer a question, put it in your own words

- Now compare your version with the original.
Do they mean the same thing? If they don't, you've misread the question. You'll be surprised how often they don't agree.

Think before you write:

Make a brief outline for each question

Number the items in the order you will discuss them

- **Get right to the point**
State your main point in the first sentence
Use your first paragraph to provide an overview of your essay.
Use the rest of your essay to discuss these points in more detail.
Back up your points with specific information, examples, or quotations from your readings and notes
- Teachers are influenced by compactness, completeness and clarity of an organized answer
- Writing in the hope that the right answer will somehow turn up is time-consuming and usually futile
- To know a little and to present that little well is, by and large, superior to knowing much and presenting it poorly--when judged by the grade received.

Writing & answering:

Begin with a strong first sentence

that states the main idea of your essay.

Continue this first paragraph by presenting key points

Develop your argument

- **Begin each paragraph**
with a key point from the introduction
- **Develop each point**
in a complete paragraph
- **Use transitions,**
or enumerate, to connect your points
- **Hold to your time**
allocation and organization
- **Avoid very definite statements**
when possible; a qualified statement connotes a philosophic attitude, the mark of an educated person
- **Qualify answers when in doubt.**
It is better to say "toward the end of the 19th century" than to say "in 1894" when you can't remember, whether it's 1884 or 1894. In many cases, the approximate time is all that is wanted; unfortunately 1894, though approximate, may be incorrect, and will usually be marked accordingly.

Summarize in your last paragraph

Restate your central idea and indicate why it is important.

Review:

Complete questions left incomplete,

but allow time to review all questions

Review, edit, correct

misspellings, incomplete words and sentences, miswritten dates and numbers.

Not enough time?

Outline your answers

See also: [Essay terms and directives](#) & [Constructing the essay exam](#)