Essay Exam Strategies

The goal of writing an essay is to demonstrate your understanding of assigned material and to communicate information and ideas clearly, directly, and logically. This implies the need for two skills: recalling information and organizing information to draw relevant conclusions.

Key Essay Exam Terms

- **Analyze**: Divide something into its component elements and examine each one.
- **Compare/Contrast**: Demonstrate similarities or differences between two things.
- **Define**: Identify and state essential traits or characteristics of something.
- **Describe**: Tell about something in detail.
- **Discuss**: Examine the subject in detail through writing.
- **Evaluate**: Assess the value of significance of something.
- **Explain**: Make a topic as clear and understandable as possible by offering reasons, examples, etc.
- **Summarize**: State the major points concisely and comprehensively.

Strategies

1) Know the subject well.
- Take notes.
- Outline reading assignments.
- List the main points.
- Define key terms.
- Summarize the argument/main points.

2) Analyze the question.
- Look for strategy terms (what the question asks you to do) and content terms (the scope and limits of the topic).
- Underline key terms.
- Number parts of a question so as not to forget anything.
- Notice if you are asked to reproduce material from the texts or discussions, asked to give your own opinions, evaluations, or examples, or asked to do a combination of these.

3) Think through your answer—organize and plan.
- Make an outline of your answer. Outlining will give you confidence before you start to write.
- Decide on the major points to cover and what order to put them in.
- Include support and evidence for the points to be included.
- Design a thesis from your outline that addresses the strategy term from the question.
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4) While drafting your answer, remember the following suggestions:

♣ Follow your outline to the end.
♣ Come right to the point in the first sentence.
♣ List new ideas in the margins or on the outline and come back to them after finishing your answer.
♣ Answer all parts of the question.
♣ Be specific by using various types of supporting details in your answer.
♣ Use transitions for clarity.
♣ Write all that is relevant and no more.

5) As for supporting details, remember to include RENNS in your exposition.

♣ Reasons for why you “see” the text in a particular way.
♣ Examples from the text to support your interpretation.
♣ Names of characters, authors, and critics indispensable to your interpretation.
♣ Numbers of formal elements, as applicable to your reading, that either inform your understanding of a text or help organize the writing of your essay.
♣ Senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch) either from your own experience or from the author’s imagery that illuminate your interpretation of the text.

6) While revising, ask yourself the following questions:

♣ Is the thesis clear?
♣ Are all the major points adequately developed and supported?
♣ Is each sentence complete?
♣ Is the essay legible?

7) Finally, reread the question to be sure you have properly and completely answered it.

Don’t stress out if you need to draw a line through something you have written. It is perfectly acceptable to scratch things out and revise your answer within the original draft, provided everything is readable.