

Strategies for Answering Essay Questions

There are basically two types of essay questions. The **short essay** requires you to write a paragraph, for up to five short essay questions in an hour. In an ~~extended essay~~, you write several paragraphs. You might be asked to write only one, or perhaps two, extended essays in an hour.

Step One: Read all essay questions before you begin to write

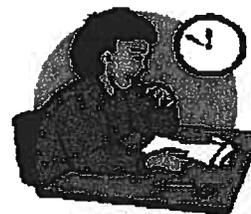
- Underline or circle key words in the directions such as *compare*, *explain*, or *define* to make sure you understand what you are being asked to do. *
- Number each part of the question.
- Jot down your first ideas in the margins or on scratch paper as you read each question.
- Begin with the questions that seem easiest to you. You'll have more confidence and think more clearly.
- Budget your time according to the point value of each question.

Step Two: Organize your ideas (2 samples on back of this page)

- Brainstorm all of the possible information you might include in your answer.
- Dig deep into your knowledge of the course material to be as complete as you can be with your answer.
- Arrange this information into an informal outline, visual map, or hierarchy of ideas. Make sure to cover all parts of the question.*
- If you have more than one essay to write, create informal outlines for **each** of the questions before starting to write any **one** of the answers.

Step Three: Write your essay

- Write a thesis sentence that summarizes the answer and gets right to the point of your essay. Include key words that are part of the question and technical terms that are relevant to the course.
- Leave space for additions to your answer by writing on every other line and on one side of the page.
- Support your thesis sentence by including definitions, examples, relevant facts, and uses. The more details, the better.
- Start a new paragraph for each main idea that you have in your outline.
- Check off each part of the outline as you cover it.
- If you run out of time on a question, quickly write down in outline form what you would write if you had time. Partially answering all questions is better than not answering some questions.



Step Four: Check your work (We do get goofy during an exam!)

- Re-read your answers. Make additions for clarity and completeness.
- Underline your key points to make it easy for your instructor to find them.
- Check your responses for errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

* Handouts and additional information available in the Study Skills Lab

