

PLANNING BEFORE YOU ANSWER¹

People like definite decisions
Tidy answers, all the little ravelings
Snipped off, the lint removed.
--Gwendolyn Brooks

Pulitzer Prize--winning poet

Writing in your own words is perhaps the scariest part of answering an essay question. There are no blanks to fill in or answers to choose from. Everything must come from you and what you've learned.

To answer an essay question, you must write from one or two paragraphs to several pages about a given topic. You are required not only to *recall* ideas and facts, but also to *organize* them into thoughtful, forceful sentences and paragraphs.

You can do a number of things to help yourself once the essay exam has begun but before you have started to answer the questions. These actions will get you ready for the questions, get you into the first question, and help you work your way through the test.

Make Notes on the Back of the Exam Sheet or Blue Book

Even before you read the exam questions, unburden your mind by quickly jotting on the back of the exam sheet or the back of the blue book the ideas, facts, and details that you have memorized but think you might forget. Furthermore, it is a positive action that will involve you in the exam immediately. Do not, however, spend more than a minute or so making these notes.

Read the Examination Directions Carefully

Notice especially whether you must answer all the questions and whether there are any time limits. Frequently, you may be given a choice of questions.

Read All the Questions

Before you write anything, read all the questions. If you have a choice among questions, select those for which you are best prepared. As you read the instructions for each question, underline or circle the key words, which tell you the form in which the answer is wanted. Then check the key words before you begin to answer the questions. (A list of key words and their meanings is enclosed in this package.)

1

Jot Cues Alongside Each Question

¹ Taken from How to Study in College 4th edition (Houghton Mifflin, Arizona. 1989)

While reading each question, quickly note a few words or phrases that immediately come to your mind. Later, when you begin writing, use these jottings and those on the back of the exam sheet or blue book to organize your answer.

Plan Your Time

It takes less time to follow these suggestions than to read them--especially in relation to the time you will gain through efficient handling of answers. Find out how much time is left after following these steps; then decide how much time to give to each question, and **stick to your plan**.

Start with the Easiest Question

Nothing inspires confidence and clear thinking more than getting off to a flying start with one question well answered. Don't sit and stare at the first exam question! Seize on an easy one, number the answer correctly, and start writing.

HOW TO ANSWER AN ESSAY QUESTION

Hugo Hartig suggests the following ten rules for answering essay questions. ² The rules are not meant to tell you **what** to write, but rather **how** to compose and word your answers.

1. Understand the Question with Precision

It is important to read the question very carefully, so that you are clear about the **exact** idea that the professor is trying to get at. A good essay question is never vague or ambiguous, and if there is anything unclear about the question, do not hesitate to ask for a clarification from the instructor. You are going to be graded very largely on the **clearness** and **precision** of your answer, so obviously the question must also be clearly and precisely understood.

2. Strive for a Complete Answer

State your ideas explicitly. Do not leave anything to be inferred or concluded by the reader. Also define your terms as you go, to show that you know the full meaning of all the words that you are using. Explain all significant statements, to show that you know why they are significant. Show the complete process of your thinking. If your instructor has to "*read between the lines*" in order to get your point, he will mark you down. Make sure that every sentence actually has a definite point and definite purpose.

3. Use Facts and Logic, Not Vague Impressions or Feelings

Your personal likes or dislikes, emotions, attitudes or "*feelings*" are of no interest to anyone except yourself. Also, they are private: no instructor has the right to demand that you reveal your feelings in any way. Students sometimes believe that the purpose of a course is to teach them to "*like*" the subject, but this is absolutely not the case. Even in a course such as "*Music Appreciation*" the purpose is not to teach students to **like** music, but rather merely to **understand** it. In an essay exam, then, it is important to remember that liking or disliking is irrelevant; understanding is all that is important. The reason for this is the simple fact that teachers are not preachers, and, therefore, they are not in the business of persuading you to like anything or believe in anything.

4. Avoid Unsupported Opinions

An opinion that is not supported by some kind of logical or factual evidence is not worth anything at all, even if it is absolutely correct. For example, if you make the statement: "*Huckleberry Finn is a masterpiece of American literature,*" and do not give any good reason to show that the statement is true; you get a zero on the statement. It is important to make significant statements, but it is equally important to show that they are either true, or untrue, on the basis of some convincing evidence or argument.

2

Be Concise

The most impressive answer is invariably the one that manages to get at the exact "*heart of the matter*" in the most direct and straight-forward manner. It is important to make complete answers, and to explain and support everything you say; but it is even more important to say exactly the right thing, and not hide this gem of thought in a rambling discussion. If you must write out your ideas, to get them organized in your mind, do so on a sheet of scratch paper, and then write out your concise answer when you really have discovered the single most significant idea.

5. Write Carefully So as to Avoid Errors

Teachers almost without exception are very prone to make snap judgments about your general intelligence on the basis of your writing style. If you misspell common words, and make clumsy errors in sentence structure, or even if you write paragraphs that lack unity and coherence, many of your instructors are going to take it as a sure sign that you are sadly lacking in basic academic ability. Once a teacher thinks this about you, you will not get much credit for your ideas, even if they are brilliant. English teachers tend to be especially prejudiced in this regard.

6. Be Natural and Sincere

Avoid the use of high-sounding jargon, super-elegant language, phony fancy style, or so-called "*fine writing*." This does not impress anybody in regard to either your literary ability or your intelligence. On the contrary, many teachers will be insulted by it, because they will believe that you are trying to give them a "*snow job*." Any teacher who has read hundreds or thousands of papers becomes very sensitive to phoniness in student writing because he sees so much of it.

7. Organize Your Answer Intelligently

Focus on either one central idea, or on several main points. In either case, follow the principle of "*one idea--one paragraph*." Write **deductive** paragraphs, in which you first state your important ideas clearly and precisely, with adequate explanation. Then follow this statement immediately with factual or logical evidence that will support it adequately and convincingly. Sometimes it is helpful to underline your key statements in order to show that you are thinking systematically; but do not overdo it, or it will be less effective. In some cases, it may be helpful to use a brief introductory sentence that states clearly in your own words exactly what the

² This section is quoted from Hugo Hartig, The Idea of Composition (Oshkosh, Wis.: Academics, 1974), page 29-32

problem is that you are going to try to solve. A concluding paragraph that answers the “So What” question may also be effective.

8. Keep It Simple

Do not get involved in deep philosophical weightiness. Especially avoid vague and fuzzy speculations that cannot be squared with ordinary common sense. Quite difficult and subtle ideas can be expressed in straightforward and simple language. If you can do this, your writing will be most impressive.

9. Understand the Instructor’s Pet Ideas

In general, every instructor uses only a few basic approaches to his subject, and he probably keeps repeating these over and over again in his discussion of various aspects. An alert student can easily identify these “*pet ideas*” and work them out carefully in his own words. The student who does this is prepared not only to see through the instructor’s questions quite readily, but he also knows exactly how to answer them, using the teacher’s own methods of problem solving! Perhaps this is the very essence of grade getting in any course that depends heavily on essay exams.

THE CONTENT OF AN ESSAY ANSWER

Your answer must demonstrate that you

- (1) understand the question with precision,
- (2) know the necessary facts and supporting materials, and
- (3) can apply reasoning to these materials.

Your only way to demonstrate that you know your stuff is through an organized answer. The following suggestions will help you get organized.

Do Not Write an Introduction

Don’t start your essay with an introductory paragraph or even with a high-sounding sentence such as “*this is, indeed, a crucial question that demands a swift solution; therefore...*” Such a general approach forces you to scatter your ideas, whereas the instructor is looking for a sharp focus. The instructor wants to know **how you answer the question**. It follows, too, that without a sharp focus, you will do serious damage to the unity of your answer. The result could be an answer that contains all the necessary details, but so mixed up that they do not convince the instructor that you know what you are talking about.

Answer the Question Directly and Forcefully in the First Sentence

Develop your essay from a strong opening sentence. The key to a direct answer is in a partial repeat of the question itself. By using the question as the stem of your answer, you cannot help but write a direct answer.

The following example shows how this principle works. The question asks for the student’s opinion; therefore, it is quite correct to start the sentence with “*I believe.*” Notice that the first line in the answer includes some of the words that are used in the question. Such an

approach keeps you honest; there can be no partial or off-focus answers. You have committed yourself to a direct answer.

Question: **What do you think is the purpose of studying sociology?**

Answer: *I believe that the purpose of studying sociology is to make us aware and conscious that people of the world are not one conglomerated mass; instead, people fall into various groups, societies, and economic systems.*

Expand on the First Sentence

Now all you need to do is put down ideas, facts, and details to support your first sentence. Notice how easy and natural this approach is. When everything you write pertains to the first sentence, you cannot help but achieve unity; everything is not only pertinent but also hangs together.

In the following example, the question is directly answered in the first sentence. The answer revolves around the “*characteristic shapes*” of dunes. All the other sentences in this short essay are on the right track as they amplify the main point: The shape. Notice that this question has two parts. One part asked for a yes-no answer; the other asks the student to “*describe.*” Simple diagrams would have been appropriate to help describe the different shapes of the dunes.

Question: **Are dunes recognizable after they have been covered with vegetation? Describe.**

Answer: *Yes, dunes can be recognized in the field after they have been covered by vegetation because dunes have characteristic shapes that cannot be entirely obscured or obliterated by vegetation. Dunes have a definite crest or summit, usually having a ling windward slope and a much steeper leeward slope. They would be especially easy to recognize if they were barchans (crescent-shaped dunes). By studying the shape of the dunes, it is often possible to determine the direction of the prevailing winds to see whether the windward slope and the winds coincide. Shape therefore indicates much more than whether a desert feature is or is not a dune.*

This essay is a one-paragraph essay. For an extended essay (fifteen to thirty minutes), it is even more important that your direct answer come first, but in the form of a full paragraph rather than in a sentence. Then each of your subsequent paragraphs should expand on one of the sentences in the first paragraph. Again, the organization of the essay will develop easily and naturally.

Use Transitions

Transitions are often called directional words; they point to the turn in the road that the reader should take. When transitions lead from one idea to the next, the instructor finds the paper clear, logical, and refreshing. A number of transitional words are included in this packet; try to use them when you have the chance.

Don’t Save the Best for Last

Avoid the mistake of saving your best idea for a big finish. If it is not included in your direct answer in the first few lines your point may never become clear to the instructor. Also,

your point may never be worked into the organizational pattern of your answer, and the precious concept you were saving for last might end up unused.

End with a Sentence or Two of Summary

The final sentence or two in your answer should summarize or repeat the points made in your opening sentence or paragraph.

IMPORTANT ODDS AND ENDS

Be Neat

A neat and legible paper or blue book does influence the grade. In a carefully controlled experiment, a group of teachers was instructed to grade a stack of examination papers on the basis of content and to disregard poor handwriting. Placed randomly within the stacks were word-for-word duplicate papers: one paper in good handwriting and the other in poor handwriting. In spite of their instructions, on the average the teachers gave the neater papers the higher grades--by a full letter grade.

Use Ink

Pencil is not appropriate for a written exam.

Write on Only One Side of Each Sheet

When both sides are used, the writing usually shows through, giving the paper a messy look. In addition, in an exam booklet, if you need to change or add something, you can write it on the blank page and draw a neat arrow to the spot where you want it inserted on the facing page.

Leave a Generous Margin, Especially on the Left Side

You will have a neater paper and provide space for the instructor's comments.

Leave Space Between Answers

This will allow you to add an idea or fact that may occur to you later. Such an idea may be blended into the answer by using an appropriate transitional phrase, such as "An additional idea that pertains to this question is..."

Watch the Time

If you think you may run out of time, just outline your remaining points to show the instructor that you did, in fact, have the necessary material in mind. You will gain credit. If you have time left over, use it to go back over your answers to correct points of grammar or to insert clarifying words or phrases.

KEY WORDS IN ESSAY QUESTIONS

This alphabetical list contains key words encountered in the directions for essay questions, along with brief explanations.

Key Word	Explanation
<i>Apply a principle</i>	Show how a principle works, through example
<i>Comment</i>	Discuss briefly
<i>Compare</i>	Emphasize similarities, but also present differences
<i>Criticize</i>	Give your judgement of good points and limitations, with evidence
<i>Define</i>	Give meanings, but not details
<i>Demonstrate</i>	Show or prove an opinion, evaluation, or judgement
<i>Describe</i>	State the particulars in detail
<i>Diagram</i>	Show a drawing with labels
<i>Differentiate</i>	Show how two things are different
<i>Enumerate</i>	List the points
<i>Evaluate</i>	Discuss advantages and disadvantages, with your opinion
<i>Explain</i>	Give reason for happenings or situations
<i>Give cause and effect</i>	Describe the steps that lead to an event or situation
<i>Give an example</i>	Give a concrete example from your book or experience
<i>Identify</i>	List and describe
<i>Illustrate</i>	Give an example
<i>Interpret</i>	State the meaning in simpler terms, using your judgement

<i>Justify</i>	Prove or give reasons
<i>List</i>	List without details
<i>Outline</i>	Make a short summary with headings
<i>Prove</i>	Give evidence and reasons
<i>Purpose</i>	How something fulfills an overall design
<i>Relate</i>	Show how things interconnect
<i>Relationship</i>	Connection between events, the linkage
<i>Review</i>	Show main points or events in summary form
<i>Show</i>	List your evidence in order of time, importance, logic
<i>Solve</i>	Come up with a solution based on given facts or your knowledge
<i>State</i>	List main points briefly without details
<i>Summarize</i>	Organize and bring together the main points only
<i>Support</i>	Back up a statement with facts and proof
<i>Trace</i>	Give main points from beginning to end of an event

TRANSITIONAL WORDS AND EXPRESSIONS

The experienced writer knows that transitional words provide directional clues for the reader, that they show the relationship between sentences in a paragraph. For example, the word furthermore says, “*Wait, I still have more to say on the subject.*” So the reader holds the previously read sentences in mind while reading the next few sentences. The following list suggests other words and expressions that you might find valuable.

Transitional Words & Expressions	Intention or Relationship
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For example, in other words, that is

Amplification

<i>Accordingly, because, consequently for this reason, hence, since, thus therefore, if...then</i>	Cause and effect
<i>In another sense, but conversely, despite, however, nevertheless, on the contrary, on the other hand, still, though, yet</i>	Contrast of change
<i>Similarly, moreover, also, too, in addition likewise, next in importance</i>	No change
<i>Add to this, besides, in addition to this, even more, to repeat, above all, indeed, more important</i>	Emphasis
<i>At the same time, likewise, similarly</i>	Equal value
<i>Also, besides, furthermore, in addition moreover, too</i>	Increasing quantity
<i>First, finally, last, next, second, then</i>	Order
<i>For these reasons, in brief, in conclusion, to sum up</i>	Summary
<i>Ten, since then, after this, thereafter, at last, at length, from now on, afterwards, before, formerly, later, meanwhile, now, presently, previously, subsequently, ultimately</i>	Time