

Writing essays in exams

Secrets of exam success

A good essay is easy to read because the ideas are clearly expressed and logically organised. The writer also demonstrates familiarity with important issues and concepts relevant to the topic. Most importantly, a good essay offers the reader a succinct response to the essay question in the form of a reasoned and well-organised argument.

It is not easy to write a good essay. It is even more difficult to write a good essay under exam conditions. Preparation and rehearsal are vital. Students sometimes feel that it is not possible to plan for essay writing in exams because they won't know what the topic will be until they see the exam. This is a mistake. You can and should plan for what you will do in the exam by practising writing essays for exams as early as possible.

This pamphlet will help ensure that you are well prepared for exam essay writing.

What do examiners look for?

Essays are a popular form of assessment at university level because they can be used to assess a range of skills as well as subject knowledge. Writing essays under exam conditions is quite different to 'normal' essay writing, however. Generally, you will not have access to source material or notes; you have only limited time to reflect on the question and plan your response; there is no time for re-drafting or major editing.

Fortunately, examiners take these factors into account. They will not expect a highly crafted piece of writing; they will not expect extensive referencing; they will not expect arguments to be as well-structured and supported as in a term essay.

Some departments will give you explicit guidelines about what they are looking for in exam essays. If such information is not available, however, assume that examiners are looking for and evaluating the following:

Has the question been answered? Marks will be allocated for certain pieces of information and for the depth of your discussion. No marks can be awarded if you don't answer the question, no matter how interesting your response.



Knowledge of the subject area and understanding of the concepts, theories and issues explored through the course.

Critical thinking skills. Have you made connections and comparisons between different arguments, interpretations or fields? Have you evaluated the merit or strength of particular theories or pieces of evidence?

Ability to produce a reasoned and organised written argument. The argument is the thread holding an essay together. An essay should adopt and argue for a particular position in relation to an issue, a question or a contention. Examiners will be evaluating the clarity, comprehensiveness and structure of your argument.

Reading and reflection. Have you systematically reviewed the materials used in the course or have you occasionally skimmed the essential reading for tutorials? When reading, have you compared authors, studies and results and identified connections, relations and counter-arguments? All these things will be apparent in the evidence and supporting arguments you advance in your essay.

Written communication skills. Grammar, sentence construction, expression, punctuation and spelling – even in handwriting – all contribute to the clarity of your essay. Whether or not examiners are looking at written expression specifically, it *will* contribute to – or detract from – your final result.

Where can you improve?

Reflect on your strengths and weaknesses. Use the criteria above to identify which areas of essay writing you need to improve most. Do you know enough about the subject? Have you read and analysed the essential material? Do you need to work on your written English or your construction of written arguments?

Prepare yourself

Find out what you will be expected to do in the exam

- How many essays must you write?
- How many marks will each one be worth?
- Will you have some choice of topics or must you be prepared to write on any and all topics covered by the course?

Note how much time you will have to write your essay in the exam. Remember that the time available to write on a topic – along with the number of marks allocated – indicates the breadth and/or depth with which you are expected to cover the topic.

Review your notes

Systematically review your notes and course material. As with any revision, your aim is to identify key topics, concepts and major theories or approaches.

Prepare a set of exam notes that are essay friendly. Given that you will need to write paragraphs in the exam, your exam notes should not be limited to dot-points. That is, while it is fine to develop a list of the main points you might want to include in an essay, be sure to develop that list into a paragraph or two.

Review old exam papers

Review old exam papers in the subject. You can use past exam papers in different ways – to test yourself and monitor your progress, to increase your knowledge and understanding of certain topics, or to help you to recognize the types of questions you are going to encounter, and the format of the exam itself.

Analyse the kinds of questions asked. Note the 'direction' words used, such as, 'compare and contrast', 'discuss', 'evaluate', 'illustrate', etc (see the list at the end of the pamphlet) Look at the marks allocated to a question. How many points might you need to make to earn that many marks? Is broad coverage expected? (For example, 'discuss the ten factors that contribute to heart disease' *30 marks*.) Or depth? (For example, 'discuss two of the causes of greenhouse gas production and how they might be eliminated' *30 marks*.)

Draft responses for the question you would find easiest and then the question you would find most difficult. This will help you to identify where your notes and/or knowledge are satisfactory, incomplete or inadequate. Remedy any omissions in your notes or understanding.

Identify probable exam topics

Looking at both your notes from this year and the past exam papers, try to anticipate the topics you will be asked to write on and possible questions.

It won't matter if you don't guess exactly the question that appears on the exam. The benefit of this exercise is to give your mind practice at imagining how the material could be organised in different ways to answer different questions.

Once you are in the exam

Read all the questions during reading time and identify the ones you might attempt. Re-read those and make a final selection.

Calculate how much time you can spend on a question, relative to its mark value. Then stick to it!

At the start of reading time make yourself some brief notes next to each of the questions you will attempt. Consider how you will respond to the question, the subject area/s you will be dealing with, and any main points or initial thoughts. This will give you something to start from, or build on, later in the exam when you are getting tired.

Write the easiest essay first. It will enable you to settle into the exam and develop your confidence.

Write yourself a brief essay plan. Consider the following:

1. How many paragraphs do you expect to write?
2. What will the topic of each paragraph be?
3. What supporting evidence or information will you provide for each major point you make?
4. What is the most logical order in which to make your points so they develop and support your argument?

Write clearly – unless your cursive script is extremely clear, consider printing. Remember that the examiner will have just a few minutes to read and mark your response. You do not want to hold them up trying to read your writing.

Try to use the wording of the question in your first sentence. For example, 'Compare the main features of orthogonal and oblique cutting processes'. You could begin your response with 'The main features of orthogonal and oblique cutting processes differ in three main ways. Firstly, ...'

Improve your essay structure by using clear transition or connecting words to help organise your ideas and to make it easier for the examiner to follow your arguments. For example: Firstly, ... Secondly, ...; In contrast to...; In addition...; As a result... (see also our *Academic words* pamphlet for more suggestions).

Try to include an introduction and conclusion. While introductions and conclusions can be pretty basic in exam essays they are worth including for the guidance they can provide you as a writer and especially for the reader/examiner. Furthermore, make them as clear and succinct as possible. If you're struggling, resort to the basics: 'This essay will argue that ...'; 'In conclusion, ...'; 'To sum up...'

Most importantly, re-read the question and check that you have answered it – all parts of it. If you haven't answered the question you will not get the marks!

Some common directives used in exam questions:	
Analyse	Examine the main ideas or components; consider how they are related and why they are significant.
Compare & Contrast	Identify two or more views about the same topic and examine both the similarities and differences.
Define	Provide the meaning of a term or establish the boundaries of a concept or topic.
Discuss	Consider a topic from various points of view. You should describe and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the various approaches/ arguments and then draw conclusions.
Evaluate	Pass judgement on the worth of something. Such judgement must be supported by pertinent evidence.
Explain	Make clear or plain – usually the steps involved in a process, or the causes/ effects of an event or phenomenon.
Illustrate	Use examples, comparisons, diagrams or graphs to explain or demonstrate a point.
Outline	Briefly review the most important aspects of a topic or the main points of a procedure or argument.