

Writing the Essay Exam

The following ideas may be useful as you prepare for an essay exam:

1. Write a synopsis of what you have learned and what you think the purpose of the class has been.
2. Talk through your synopsis with someone else in the class, comparing purposes, content, and interpretations.
3. Write a set of questions you would ask if you were the instructor and wanted to know if your students understood the material.
4. Write your own set of responses to these, and/or exchange sets of questions with someone else in the class. Then discuss your answers.

Here are some suggestions that may be useful as you take the exam:

1. Plan your time. Note the point allotments and look at the time allotments. Give the most time to the highest point questions. Keep an eye on the time so that you can spend time answering each question. Also allow for time to complete or edit answers. If you run short on time, outline the essay you would write if you had time.
2. Read through all the questions once. Underline key words in the question. Are you being asked to compare, to give examples, to define, to discuss? Answers will come to mind immediately for some questions. On the test questions sheet or a piece of scrap paper provided by your instructor, write down key words, lists, and quotes, as you read. When you get to each question, you'll have a head start on organizing your thoughts. You may also avoid these ideas being blocked, or unavailable for retrieval, when the time comes to write the later questions. You will likely reduce the number of times you disrupt your thoughts by knowing that you can refer back to your notes. Writing notes will give you confidence to concentrate on the answer to each question.
3. Try to put the question in your own words. Then check to see if your version of the question agrees with the original on the exam. Adjust accordingly.
4. A mini-outline can be very helpful in organizing your thoughts. Put it on the test question sheet or a piece of scrap paper provided by your instructor. You can add to the outline as you write your answer, but at least you will have a framework and your resulting essay will likely be more compact, complete, clear, and organized.
5. Write an introduction based on the question's terms, consisting of the main point to be made in your answer. Then summarize your essay at the end, paraphrasing the introduction. Leave space as you write for completing or clarifying ideas when you reread your answers.
6. Take time to reread your essay for:
 - a. Spelling
 - b. Omitted words and parts of words
 - c. Omitted parts of questions
 - d. Hastily written dates and figures (reversals such as 1935 for 1953)

Please give us feedback about whether these suggestions are useful and give us additional ideas! Call the Academic Support Center (x3288) or email (asc@stolaf.edu) or stop in (Old Main Annex, Room 1 or the Den, Level 1 in Rolvaag Library).