ANSWERING ESSAY QUESTIONS IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Writing well takes practice. Answering essay questions requires more than just simply knowing the answer to the question. Good writing in the social sciences requires that you be mentally organized, have a firm understanding of the material, and of course, solid communication and writing skills.

One of the keys to good academic writing is exposing yourself to plenty of good reading. The more you read from a variety of quality sources (good books, scholarly journals & periodicals) the more you'll begin to reflect the style and quality of good academic writing in your own works.

In my classes, I assign take-home essay exams (a week ahead of time) so students can have plenty of time to organize their thoughts, plan their answers and proofread their work. I consider these essays to be a showcase opportunity for students, a chance for students to show the very best work they can. It's a chance for students to shine as brilliantly as possible through their work without all of the hurried stress associated with doing in-class tests and assignments.

Following are some keys to answering essay questions that I think will help students show their best work. I recommend that students keep these points in mind while preparing responses to my essay exams.
OVERVIEW OF AN ESSAY EXAM

The main task is to answer the question. If a response rambles, wanders, or otherwise includes material that is not directly relevant to the question, it will be marked down. The key is to communicate your thoughts on the question. Don't answer a question that has not been asked!

Compose your answer as thoroughly as you can, without including extra information. This means that you should have a direct response to the question, "get to the point" efficiently, and support your point with relevant sources. You should know the material well enough to include citations to sources that we have studied, and you faithfully represent that material. The key points to your answer should be clearly stated and be the focus of your answer. The key points should be obvious to the reader and not buried amongst peripheral material.

Multi-paragraph answers are essential. Use paragraphs to indicate related concepts and to give your response a coherent structure.

Use complete sentences in your response. Your response should demonstrate your knowledge in the best possible light, and your use of language should show that you do understand the concepts. Improper grammar, poor sentence construction, and other language problems impede communication and run the risk of lowering your score.

Write your essay using the standard format: INTRODUCTION (your thesis), BODY, and CONCLUSION.

The Introduction to your essay should be bold, direct, and assertive - it should present in general (or specific) terms the point that you intend to prove or display in your essay. This, to the professor/reader (and you), is the presentation of the thesis.

The Body of your essay is where you use the facts you have learned to prove the validity of your opening position - your thesis. Don't save the best until last.

The Conclusion of your essay examination can be a time for reflection and summarizing of your thesis, a time for corollaries, or a time for simple reiteration of the points presented in the Introduction and proven in the Body. Whatever it is, the Conclusion will confuse you only if you do not know what you have been writing. In general, the Conclusion need be nothing more than a space in which you say in so
"I said such-and-such in the beginning, I have validated with facts and earlier studies the correctness of my assessment, therefore what I have argued is correct."

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**PREPARING FOR AN ESSAY EXAM**

In an exam like ours, in which you receive the exam questions with ample time to prepare and edit the questions, I recommend that you follow these steps:

1. Before answering any questions, read the directions thoroughly and carefully to be sure you understand exactly what is being asked. If the directions are not clear, ask the instructor or test proctor for clarification.

2. Read all of the questions before answering any. As you read each question, write down any relevant ideas that occur to you. Also, circle any key words (e.g., "define", "compare", "explain", "contrast") in the question that tell you what kind of answer is wanted. Understand the question, read the question carefully. Be sure to distinguish between the relevant information and the extraneous information. Underline or highlight the key points in the question. This is particularly important for essay questions that ask you to address several points (as mine usually do).

3. If you have a choice of questions to answer, answer the questions that you are most prepared for. DON'T HURRY YOUR ANSWER! You have a week to prepare it, take your time. Consider what information is presented and what information you need. Plan your answer before you start writing. This may seem like a waste of your time. However, it is a greater waste of time to write unnecessary information or to erase and re-write. Jotting down a quick outline will remind you of the key points that you want to make. Making a quick diagram can also help you focus your thoughts. Then write out an "ideal" response to each question. Fine-tune that response so that you are sure that you know the material, and that you convey that knowledge effectively.

4. Answer the essay question directly in your first sentence. You can help yourself stay focused by using a partial repeat of the question (e.g., if asked "What is the significance of the threshold hypothesis," you might write "The significance of the Threshold Hypothesis is..."").
5. Next, as you proceed to write the rest of your answer, help the instructor follow your answer by providing clues to your pattern of organization. Fill in the details, facts and ideas necessary to support your first sentence. Use transitional phrases to begin each paragraph such as “First...,” “Second...,” “next,” “finally,” “on the other hand,” “consequently,” “furthermore” and “in conclusion”.

6. Answer the question posed. This requires that you understand the question first. If you don't carefully read the question, you may end up wasting time answering a question that was not even asked and never get around to actually answering the question posed. Think before you answer.

7. Put your best ideas in the first few lines or paragraphs of your answer. Do not save these for a "big finish" because you may run out of time, or forget to work these in to your answer.

8. Be clear and accurate. Make sure your answer is Factual, Logical, Relevant, and Concise. Don’t ramble. Include only information relevant to the question. Don't regurgitate everything about the subject. Be discerning. Where appropriate, use examples to illustrate your points, but do not use examples that are in the text or were part of class. Remember, your task is to demonstrate that you understand the concept, and not to parrot back to me something from class or the readings.

8. End your essay with one or two sentences that summarize the main points (see conclusion above).

9. RE-READ THE QUESTION. When you've "finished" writing, re-read the question. Check off specific directives in the question and be sure that you've thoroughly addressed them in your answer. Be sure that you’ve actually answered all points in the question.

10. PROOFREAD, PROOFREAD, PROOFREAD. Proofread your answer. Because an essay test is also a test of your writing ability, be sure to spend time to review and proofread your answer. Look for mistakes in grammar and punctuation, check for misspelled or missing words, and omit needless words. Don’t rely on the word processor spellchecker alone. DO NOT turn in your first draft! Proofread again a day later - starting with the original question. Get a fresh look at your work. The next day you’ll often find “train of thought” errors that you miss while you’re still deep in your writing mode.
GOOD STRATEGIES TO ALWAYS EMPLOY

• The key points should be obvious to the reader and not buried amongst peripheral material.

• Use relevant technical terminology to answer the question. Correctly use the relevant educational or technical terms (and acronyms) that you learn from your courses. Technical terms are highly specific and reduce the total number of words that you will need to write. Using technical terms to communicate will be essential in your professional life. This being said, be sure to explain the technical terms to the reader to show your clear understanding of their concepts. Once explained you can fell free to use the term/acronym from that point forward.

• Support your answer with evidence and/or examples from class lectures and reading. A hallmark of a good academic writer is that they support statements with evidence, citations to literature and connections to lectures and class readings.

MISTAKES THAT YOU SHOULD ALWAYS AVOID

1. Do not write too much. Do not try to write everything that you have ever heard related to the question. Answer the question directly, thoroughly, but without excess information.

2. Do not write a good answer to the wrong question. In other words, make sure that you answer the question that is asked and not something else on the related topic.

3. Do not expect the instructor to figure out what you mean. Do not expect the instructor to find the relevant information in a collection of irrelevant information. Do not expect the instructor to read between the lines and make connections that you should be making.
ADVICE SPECIFIC TO ESSAY QUESTIONS

- Your attitude when writing should be that this paper is targeted at someone who is virtually uninformed of your topic and thus you should explain everything that falls outside the realm of "common knowledge."

- Use facts and logic, not just your feelings about something; exams are testing your understanding of a subject matter.

- Include only *one main idea per paragraph* -- state your important idea clearly and precisely, and then follow this statement immediately supporting factual or logical evidence.

Because you are given more time for these types of exams, your instructor will probably expect higher quality in your writing.

INCORPORATE INSTRUCTOR'S PET IDEAS

1. Be neat - research has shown that when the same paper is written neatly or sloppily, the graders on average rated the neat paper a letter grade higher.

2. Write on only one side of the sheet and leave a generous margin.

3. Double space to make later editing easier.

4. Leave wide margins on each side for your instructor's comments.
SUMMARY: What is a well-written answer to an essay question?

Well Focused

Be sure to answer the question completely, that is, answer all parts of the question. Avoid "padding." A lot of rambling and ranting is a sure sign that the writer doesn't really know what the right answer is and hopes that somehow, something in that overgrown jungle of words was the correct answer.

Well Organized

Don't write in a haphazard "think-as-you-go" manner. Do some planning and be sure that what you write has a clearly marked introduction which both states the point(s) you are going to make and also, if possible, how you are going to proceed. In addition, the essay should have a clearly indicated conclusion that summarizes the material covered and emphasizes your thesis or main point.

Well Supported

Do not just assert something is true, prove it! What facts, figures, examples, tests, etc. prove your point? In many cases, the difference between an A and a B as a grade is due to the effective use of supporting evidence.

Well Packaged

People who do not use conventions of language can be thought of by their readers as less competent and/or less educated. If you need help with these or other writing skills, go to the Writing Lab or seek additional help.