

Taking Essay Tests

Preparing to Write

People often use short phrases and symbols when taking notes. While helping them write information quickly, it also means that they are *practicing writing incomplete sentences*. One way to practice writing smooth and complete sentences in a short amount of time is to write your notes in complete sentences. However, if you do not have time to do this in class, then as soon as possible, read your notes and change them to complete sentences. Then read them to yourself out loud. This exercise has three benefits: It will help you practice ideas in complete thoughts instead of keywords. Second, putting your notes into sentences helps you see the relationships between pieces of information. Finally, it helps you study!

Answer Length

To compose successful essay test answers, you must use time management. Read through the test before you begin. Figure out how many minutes you can spend on each question. Then, at the beginning of each question, think about how to begin your answer. It also helps to have an idea of where your answers will end because you do not need formal introductions and conclusions on essay tests.

Before you know how long an answer should be on an essay test, you need to know how much you can possibly write in certain amounts of time. For this exercise, you will need a book (in English), a watch, and a quiet place to write. Begin copying out of your book while you time yourself. After 3 minutes, mark how much you have written. Continue writing, marking where you are after 6 minutes, 9 minutes, and 12 minutes. At the end of 12 minutes, look at how much you have written for each time period. For example, if you have 1/3 of a page at six minutes, then you know that 1/3 of a page is your limit for a six-minute answer. Knowing how much you *can* write gives you an ending to progress toward. So, at any time during the test, you will know how far you need to go to finish.

Practice Tests

Before taking essay tests, you need to practice. Ask your instructor for a few *sample* questions *like* the ones that will be on the test. However, if your instructor prefers not to do this, most textbooks include study questions at the end of each chapter. Alternatively, make up your own questions.

Time yourself as you answer the questions. If it helps, you can practice making mind maps as well. This will allow you to review your essays to look for ways to improve your organization and prepare (study) for the real thing.

Organizing Your Answer and Staying on Topic

Usually, how you organize your answer to the question depends on the organization implied in the question. For instance, if the question is "Which two people are most influential in American culture?" then your answer would begin by saying, "The two most influential people in American culture are Barack Obama and Beyoncé" (or whoever you believe best answers the question). This is the answer to the question; the rest of the essay should support this short answer. (Discuss Barack Obama's influence first; then, write about Beyoncé's influence). This first sentence also provides your organization because you will discuss the main points in the order they are given in your beginning sentence; it is basically your thesis statement. Draft the sentence so that all main points of your answer to the entire essay prompt are suggested in it.

As you write your detailed answer paragraph(s), review the question and your first sentence to help you keep your structure in mind and stay on topic, rather than write irrelevant information. To most instructors, thoroughly answering the wrong question is as bad as no answer at all.

Transitions

If your answer has more than one part, you will need to use transitions to guide the reader from one point to the next and *show that you understand the answer completely*.

Here is a short list of some common transition expressions and their functions:

- **To add or continue:** also, furthermore, in addition, moreover, similarly
- **To show contrast or unexpected developments:** although, conversely, however, in contrast, on the other hand
- **To give specific examples:** for example, for instance, in fact, to illustrate
- **To show cause and effect:** as a result, consequently, then, therefore, thus, due to, since, because of, owing to, the reason for

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