

PREPARING FOR ESSAY TESTS

Long-term preparation

- Read the course syllabus, and make note of any themes or connections you notice. Check with your instructor to see if he/she agrees, and then as the class proceeds, pay attention to how the ideas presented relate to these themes.
- Learn as much as possible from your instructor and other sources about the form and content of upcoming tests, including grading criteria. For example, how much does your instructor emphasize grammatical correctness and writing?

Short-term preparation

- A week or two before a test, review your notes and reading assignments and generate a list of main ideas or themes that your instructor covered in class. Pay attention to the relationships between these themes; they may be clues to possible essay questions.
- For each major topic, create a summary sheet of relevant data, and then review actively by integrating notes, text, and supplementary information such as diagrams or paragraph summaries in your own words. Show your review sheets to your instructor to make sure you're on the right track.
- Use these relationship charts and summary sheets to generate a list of possible questions. Outline answers to as many of these questions as time permits.
- Compare and contrast questions are typical on essay tests. An effective way to prepare for this sort of question is to create a chart.

Example:

Compare and contrast President Bush's proposed private accounts for Social Security and the current system.

ISSUES	private accounts	current system
Social	individual assumes risk	society assumes risk
Political	Republican	Democrat
Economic	potentially gaining higher investment yields	risks of the marketplace

Before you write

1. Budget your time according to the point value of each question. Be sure to allow time for reviewing and proofreading your work at the end of the exam period.
2. Read all essay questions before you start to write, paying attention to key words such as compare, explain, justify, and define. Make sure you understand the question, and if you're not sure, ask your instructor for clarification.
3. Begin with the question that seems easiest.
4. Make a rough outline of your answer. Quickly list the ideas and facts you want to include, and number the points in the order you want to present them. Be sure to distinguish main topics from supporting examples.

While you write

1. State a definite, clear thesis within the first few sentences of your answer.
2. Leave space for additions to your answer by writing on every other line and on only one side of each page.
3. Follow your outline, and be specific with examples and details.
4. When you reach the end of the time for a given question, move on to the next one. Partially answering all questions is better than fully answering some and not answering others at all. Remember: the instructor can't give you partial credit for questions you haven't attempted.
5. If you find yourself out of time on a question, quickly write an outline of the rest of your answer. The grader might be able to give you partial credit for it.
6. If you don't know much about a question, relax and brainstorm for a few moments. Recall your readings, lectures, and discussions. This might trigger memories relevant to the question.
7. If your mind goes blank, don't panic. Take some deep breaths, and for a moment think about something pleasant that's not related to the test. Then, if you're still blank, move on to a different question.

After you write

1. Read through your answers and make any necessary additions.
2. Proofread for errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation.