

University of Connecticut

Writing Center

Taking Essay Exams

To master an essay exam, a student needs to do two things, usually in a limited time: 1. Figure out what the question is asking and 2. Organize and write the answer. Below are some tips for doing both.

Analyze the Question

Below is a sample essay question, followed by an analysis of what the student is expected to provide in way of an answer.

Sometimes a good theory can solve a debate in a particular research area by showing how seemingly contradictory findings can actually result from the same underlying psychological process. Give two examples of theories that do this in social psychology, and explain how they accomplish it.

First, look for what kind of information you are expected to provide: a list? An example? An opinion? An argument? (See below for definition of commonly used terms)

The second sentence tells you: *Give two examples and explain how they meet the criteria in the first sentence.*

Next, work back and fill in the details: *an example of what?* Don't rush through reading the question; you risk making the costly mistake of answering the wrong question.

A student in a hurry might think the question asks for two examples of good theories that solved debates. But the question is narrower than that. It asks for two theories that show how a single process can account for findings that were in conflict before.

3. If you're in doubt as to whether you understand the question, ask your instructor.

Organize Your Answer

1. It may be helpful to briefly outline your answer before you write it out. This will keep you from getting lost in the middle of the essay, and will remind you to leave enough time to answer all the parts of the question. If there is a page limit on the essay, put the outline on a separate page.

2. Another outline strategy is to go through the test and outline each answer before writing any of them. With this strategy, if you run out of time to answer all the questions, your outlines may gain you some partial credit.

3. Read the exam question for clues about organization. For example, if the question asks you to give a list or an outline, don't waste your time writing a formal essay.

Manage Your Time

Always read through **all** exam questions before you start writing. Then decide the best way to manage your time. For example, some students prefer to answer the easiest

questions first, and others like to start with the questions that are worth the most points. If you have to choose among a number of essays it may help to briefly outline a few to decide which are most comfortable answering.

Terms used in psychology essay questions & Assignment

The terms below commonly appear in paper assignments or in essay exam questions. Some of these terms may have different meanings in different contexts. When in doubt, ask your instructor for clarification.

Compare: Write about the ways in which two or more things are similar and the ways in which they are different.

Contrast: Focus on the ways in which two or more things are different.

Criticize/Critique: Make a detailed judgment. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the thing you are judging? Is it correct? Is it morally acceptable? Does it make sense? Is it too costly? Include any judgment that is relevant to what you are critiquing. Your judgment or conclusion *must* be backed up with evidence.

Define: Tell the reader what a term means using words that are already familiar to the reader. Definitions should be brief and to the point. The word being defined should not be part of the definition.

Describe: Explain the subject in such a way that the reader experiences it secondhand. A description usually is a list of relevant facts or a summary of a line of evidence.

Diagram: Present the requested information in a visual way. Diagrams include drawings, charts, and graphs. Labels often are needed for the reader to understand the information.

Discuss: Provide a complete, detailed, in-depth analysis. Discussions often include **comparison** and **criticism**.

Elaborate: Go beyond a brief statement -- include additional comments, **descriptions**, **explanations**, or examples.

Enumerate: See **List**.

Evaluate: An evaluation is similar to a **critique**, although it may imply a more general discussion of a program or theory's strengths and weaknesses.

Explain: The emphasis in an explanation is on the *why* and/or the *how* of the thing that is being explained, as opposed to a simple statement or description.

Illustrate: Provide either a concrete example or a **diagram**, whichever is appropriate.

Interpret: Translate or explain the subject in your own words and give your opinion about it. See also **criticize/critique**.

Justify: Tell the reader why you think your answer or position makes sense (see also **criticize/critique**).

List: Be sure to identify what it is you are listing. Provide your list in brief form using numbers or bullets unless the question indicates otherwise. A list is less detailed than an **outline**.

Outline: An outline is a brief, organized overview that includes main points and important sub-points, but omits minor details. Use numbers and letters, or bullet points to organize your outline. The traditional outline format is not always necessary.

Relate: Describe any connections or associations between two or more things (see also **compare**).

Review: Give a brief, organized, *critical* overview of important points. Based on this overview, you should draw a conclusion.

Summarize: A summary consists of a condensed version of the main points that have been (or will be) covered. No details, examples, or elaboration should be included.

Synthesize: Combine parts to form a whole. A synthesis goes beyond a list or summary in that you should not only summarize each of the points to be included, but also explain how they relate to each other.

Trace: To trace means to describe a course of events, in order, from beginning to end.

Adapted from:

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