Test Taking: Essay Exams

The same principles for writing good out-of-class essays apply to writing good in-class essays. For example, both kinds of essays are more successful when you take into consideration:

- Your purpose - responding to the question being asked,
- Your audience,
- The information you need to answer the question,
- How you develop a thesis with support;
- How you prove your assertions with evidence;
- How you guide your readers with transitions between ideas, paragraphs, etc.

However, there are some differences to keep in mind as you prepare to write and essay exam answer versus an essay paper. The most important one is the purpose for writing. Usually you write a research paper, for example, to learn more about your selected topic; however, you write essay exams to demonstrate your mastery of course content and subject specific knowledge. You are not only conveying information, but also proving to your audience--the examiner--that you have mastered the information and can work with it. In other words, your purpose is both informative and persuasive. Keeping this purpose in mind will help you both prepare for and write the essay.

PREPARING FOR THE EXAM

Study all of your course lesson objectives looking for the connections between ideas. Your instructor is not looking for a collection of unrelated pieces of information. Rather, he or she wants to see that you understand the whole picture, i.e., how the generalizations or concepts create the framework for the specific facts, and how the examples or details fill in the gaps. So, when you're studying, try to think about how the information fits together.

Prepare practice questions. Try to prepare for questions that are likely to be asked. If your instructor has given you the questions themselves or a study sheet in advance, practice answering those questions. Otherwise, try to anticipate questions your instructor is likely to ask and practice those. At the very least, outline how you would answer the test questions; however, it's better to actually write out the answers. That way, you will know where you need to study more.

TAKING THE EXAM

Again, while you're taking the exam, remember that it's not simply what you say or how much you say, but HOW you say it that's important. You want to show your instructor that you have mastered the material.
Plan your time. Although you will be working under pressure, take a few minutes to plan your time. Determine how many minutes you can devote to each answer. You will want to devote most of your time to the questions that are worth the most points, perhaps answering those questions first. On the other hand, you might want to answer first the questions that you are best prepared for.

Read the questions thoroughly. Take a few minutes before writing your essay to read the question carefully in order to determine exactly what you are being asked to do. Most essay exam questions, or "prompts," are carefully worded and contain specific instructions about WHAT you are to write about as well as HOW you should organize your answer. The prompt may use one or more of the following terms. If you see one of these terms, try to organize your essay to respond to the question or questions indicated.

Plan your answer. Jot down the main points you intend to make as you think through your answer. Then, you can use your list to help you stick to the topic. In an exam situation, it's easy to forget points if you don't write them down.

Write out your essay, using good writing techniques. As was said earlier, essay exams are like other essays, so use the same good writing strategies you use for other kinds of writing. Keep in mind that your purpose is to persuade your reader--the examiner--that you know the material.

First, create a thesis for your essay that you can defend. Often, you can turn the questions stated or implied on the exam into an answer and use it as your thesis. This sentence also functions as an introduction.

Then, proceed immediately to explain, develop, and support your thesis, drawing upon materials from text(s), lectures, and class discussions. Be sure to support any and all generalizations with concrete evidence, relevant facts, and specific details that will convince your reader that your thesis is valid. Make your main points stand out by writing distinct paragraphs, and indicate the relationship between them with transitions.
Finally, sum up your argument with a brief conclusion that lends your essay a clear sense of closure.

FINISHING THE EXAM

Proofread your answer. Reserve a few minutes after completing your essay to proofread it carefully.

First, make sure you were able to stick to the question. Look over your response and remember to always answer exactly the question asked without digressing. If you find you have digressed, neatly cross out the words or paragraphs. It's better to cross out a paragraph that is irrelevant (and to replace it with a relevant one if you have time) than to allow it to stand. In this context at least, quality is always preferable to quantity. Also check sentence structure, spelling and punctuation.