

Answering Essay Questions on Exams: General Advice

(oh, yeah... these are also helpful for professional and technical writing)



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Essay questions have long been a staple of exams. For equally as long, students have struggled with writing answers to those questions. This page contains some general advice for answering these questions; other pages in the series focus on specific types of essay questions. The advice in these pages is comes from one who has been reading and writing essays for decades; it is meant to help students who get little direction from teachers on writing essay.

First: Remember that the answers teachers look for are based on the specifics of what they have taught and what they expect; if they give you advice, take it!

Second: Remember these answers are going to be read by those with a large stack of papers and little time to read. Do everything you can to make it easy to read:

Restate the question to both help you get going and to prove you understand what it being asked.

A tenant of training is: “tell ‘em what you are going to tell ‘em, tell ‘em, tell ‘em what you told ‘em.” Translated into essay writing: “make your point, explain your point, and reiterate your point.”

Organization is key. Your essay may not be the most eloquent writing ever, but that is not necessary. Keep it simple. Make your point; prove your point. End.

Third: Vocabulary matters; it helps you add the detail that readers expect.

Use the vocabulary used in class; of course use it the way it should be used.

Avoid pronouns (“He,” “she,” “it,” “they...” all add ambiguity that can make readers unsure of what you meant and they are likely to assume you didn’t know, mark you down and move on).

Avoid “etc.” Et cetera literally means “and other.” If there are “others,” add them. If you don’t have time, then use, “and similar *things*.”

