

Writing Exam Essays

Writing essays during a timed exam can feel stressful. This handout offers helpful strategies for studying and navigating the exam.

Studying tips

Because reviewing a semester's worth of texts and notes can be overwhelming, it is important to develop a **strategic approach** to studying. Here's one that you may find useful:

1. **Review** the syllabus and your course notes
2. Identify major course **themes**
3. Reframe your course notes into **condensed study notes** that reflect major themes.
4. Look for instances of **repetition** within your notes in order to identify possible essay topics
5. Use the **syllabus** to help you identify places where repetition aligns with the course content
6. Practice **outlining essay answers** for each potential topic you have identified

Helpful tip: Try organizing your notes into **cue cards** to both condense and reorder the course material, allowing you to see new connections.

You can also try designing and answering **anticipated essay questions**. This strategy would work well in a small-group setting as well.

Exam tips

Understand the question

- Identify important **keywords** that will help clarify the approach to the material and the kind of work your prof will be evaluating. This will tell you how to answer the question
- Possible keywords: analyze, describe, evaluate, compare, contrast, apply, identify, explain, discuss

Organize your time

- Use the **amount of time allotted** for the exam in addition to the **weight** of each question to determine how much time to spend on the essay
- Leave yourself a few minutes to **outline** and **revise** each question
- **Stick to your plan** - don't be alarmed when other students leave the exam before you're finished

Outline and plan

- Develop an outline that includes a **thesis, main points** for each body paragraph, specific **examples** you will use to support your main points, and a brief **conclusion**
- Your thesis should answer all aspects of the exam question

Write

- Your writing needs to be **legible** - your prof can't give your marks for sentences they can't read
- Refer frequently to your **outline** to keep yourself on track
- Answer "**so what?**" by deliberately explaining the significance of your evidence and how it answers the exam question
- Avoid **repetition**
- **Edit** and **revise** your answers

Helpful tip: *Bring your student card and all necessary writing utensils to the exam.*