

Test Taking Strategies for Essay Tests

1. **Always read the directions carefully and read them twice.** Is there a time limit? Do the instructions say how many points the question is worth? Do you have a choice of questions? Or, must you answer all of the essay questions? Do the directions say how long the answer should be or how many reasons you must give to support your opinion?
2. **Set up a time schedule.** This is also a good time to relax before you get started. Allow a limited amount of time for each question. It is usually better to have some incomplete answers, than to leave any questions completely unanswered. If time runs out, do an outline.
3. **Do the easy questions first.** This helps you relax and builds your confidences. As you write, information concerning the other essays will come to mind; jot that information down immediately.
4. **Note the key words that tell you what to do.** “*Why* did the US decide to use an atomic bomb on Japan to end WWII? *Do you think* these reasons *justified* the use of the bomb? *Explain your reasons.*” **Answer all parts of the question.**
5. Common verbs used in essay questions: (See Handout – Keys Words in Essay Questions)
 - a. **compare and contrast** – explain the similarities and differences between two or more items
 - b. **discuss** – to investigate by reason or argument
 - c. **trace** – show the steps in a process or how an event developed
 - d. **define** – explain the meaning of a word or idea
 - e. **explain** – tell how or why
 - f. **name or list** – make a brief list
 - g. **diagram or illustrate** – draw a picture and label the parts
6. **Paraphrase the question (write it in your own words).** This may help clarify the question if it is complicated.
7. Think of a single statement to serve as a theme for your answer. Test your statement for directness incoming to grips with the problem. Think through the details needed to enlarge it.
8. **Jot down notes and make a quick outline on the back of the test.** If you make notes as soon as they come to mind, you won’t forget them. As you write, more ideas will come. Teachers are greatly influence by a compact, clear, and well organized answer. Therefore, an outline before writing and numbering your supporting ideas whenever appropriate is a good idea.
9. Write an **introduction** by stating the main point you will make. If you cannot think of one in the beginning, leave a few lines blank so you can fill them in later.
10. Each **main idea** should be a new paragraph and followed by supporting details (facts, dates, examples)
11. Write a **summary**, which is simply a paraphrase of the introduction. A neat bundle with a beginning and ending is very satisfying to the reader.

Example of a good theme and outline:

Question: Discuss the problem of water conservation in this country.

Answer: Theme might be, “We are wasting our water t such a rate that unless we take drastic steps immediately to conserve it, the tap may run dry in ten years.”

Organize Details:

- 1) What is the problem? (Introduction – include the theme)
- 2) How are we wasting water?
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
- 3) What are present sources of water?
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
- 4) What are possible sources in the future?
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
- 5) What steps should be taken?
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____
- 6) Conclusion

12. Answers should be logical and clear, but they don't have to be literary masterpieces. **Use short, simple sentences** to make you points.
13. Provide specific as well as general information; use the **technical vocabulary** of the course.
14. Write as if the reader knows nothing about the subject.
15. **Qualify answers when in doubt.** It is better to say "Toward the end of the nineteenth century" than to say "In 1894" when you can't remember the exact date. In many cases, the approximate time is all that is wanted. A qualified statement connotes an appreciation of the tentative nature of our knowledge.
16. **Think of examples as you write.** Even if you do not use them in your essay, they will help you to see if your arguments are clear, correct, and applicable to the question.
17. Add **transitional words** – first, second, moreover, in addition, also, however, finally, therefore, on the other hand, nevertheless. These clarify the framework behind your thinking.
18. **Reread your paper.** When writing in haste we tend to: misspell words, omit words or parts of words, omit parts of questions, and miswrite dates and figures (1343 for 1953, \$50 for \$.50). In addition, initial anxiety often causes careless assumptions and omissions that can be spotted during the proofread. Reread the question to be certain you answered what was asked.
19. **Never leave blanks.** If you have no idea of the correct answer, write something related. Five percent is better than no percent.

Review Exam Results - This will help you better prepare for the next test.

1. Why were points deducted from my answer?
2. Can I easily identify the main idea?
3. Did I omit supporting details?
4. How well did I answer lower and higher level questions?
5. What were the sources of my errors (notes, text, handouts)?

Adjust study plans for next time.

7/2008