

Writing Essay Exams

It often takes multiple drafts and a significant amount of time to develop a piece of polished writing. When writing essay exams, you do not have the luxury of time. Nevertheless, there are a number of strategies that you can employ to help you succeed.

1. Look for task words in the essay question

Re-read the essay question multiple times to ensure that you understand what you are being asked. Look for task words such as “argue,” “analyze,” “assess,” “describe,” “evaluate,” “reflect,” etc. Identifying the task word helps you determine what kind of essay you need to write.

There is a fundamental difference between arguing and describing, for example. In the first case, your goal is to persuade the reader of a certain perspective, while in the latter case your goal is to inform your reader about the features of something (e.g., an historical event, a chemical process).

2. Spend time outlining your essay

Once you understand what you are being asked, it is important to spend a few minutes to quickly develop an outline for your essay. This will help to ensure that your essay is well structured.

For argumentative essays, it is important to develop a thesis statement, the supporting reasons for your thesis, and the evidence that you will use to support each reason. Once this template is in place, you will be in a good position to begin writing. Remember that a good argumentative thesis is contestable and specific.

For descriptive essays, it is also important to prepare a brief outline beforehand. Think about how you can divide the paper into sections. For example, if you are being asked to describe an historical event or a chemical process, you could organize your paper in sections by distinguishing different stages. If you were asked to describe the three different branches of the Canadian Government, it would make sense to structure your paper in three parts. Dividing your paper into clear sections helps with organization and readability.

3. Keep your introduction and conclusion brief

Since your primary goal with an essay exam is to answer the question with as much detail as possible, you can keep the introduction and conclusion brief. An introduction is necessary to highlight the topic and your thesis statement, but you do not need to provide much context. It is best to get to the point as quickly as possible. As for the conclusion, this is your opportunity to sum up the main idea of your paper. Like the introduction, it should be brief.

4. Write legibly and review before submitting

For exams written in-person, it can be difficult for graders to read unclear handwriting. Since you do not want your great ideas to go unrecognized, try to write as legibly as possible. It can also help improve readability to write on every other line.

Also, once you've completed your draft, spend a little time reviewing it. If you are writing it at home to submit online, use your grammar and spell checker, but don't rely solely on them. Read it over yourself to make sure that you've expressed yourself clearly and have cited anything that should be cited (to whatever degree of detail required by the instructor). Make any necessary corrections or additions. If you are writing in person, having an extra space between lines gives you the room to make any necessary edits or additions.