Essay Exams

Essay exams are a common method for professors to test a student’s knowledge of course material. However, **knowing the material is not enough**.

Many professors claim that, content aside, the main reasons a student would receive a lower grade on an essay exam include the following:

- Lack of clear thesis
- Lack of organization
- Insufficient support for ideas
- Lack of unity

The good news: one essay exam strategy can address all of these areas.

First of all, improvement in any area requires practice, preparation, and patience. Rather than waiting until exam time to respond to an essay question for your course, write your own questions throughout the term. You can anticipate exam questions by analyzing the syllabus, the textbook, and lectures. Try to figure out what the important themes are in the course and check in with your professor to see if you’re on track. Write questions about these themes and respond with essays that integrate course material.

Whether the question is yours or your professor’s, **try the following ABCDEF process and develop a “matrix” before you start writing the essay:**

- **A**nalyze the question. Make sure you know what it’s asking. Even a brilliant essay will fail if it doesn’t directly answer the question.

- **B**rainstorm responses. Jot down keywords for ideas that come to mind in response to the topic. Don’t edit yourself at this point—even if an idea is off track, it may remind you of one that’s right on the money.

- **C**luster related ideas. Group the keywords in your brainstorming list. Do some of them fit together in an identifiable category? Are some of them general and others more specific? Transfer these to your matrix accordingly.

- **D**evelop the categories. If you lack specifics or examples to support an idea, you can see these gaps pretty easily in the matrix. Flesh them out.

- **E**liminate unnecessary/unrelated information. It’s possible to include too much in an essay, so cross out points that don’t fit well into the overall plan that is emerging.

- **F**ormat the essay. Decide on an organizational structure that works well for the material in your matrix. Often, the left-hand column includes information for a good introduction and each of the rows can be a body paragraph. Then you just have to wrap it up.