

# Write it out!

## A Quick Guide for Responding to Essay Questions



Essay questions are one of the most collectively dreaded types of questions during exams- whether they be from college students or even during job exams. But there are a few tips you can keep in mind to help make writing it a little easier as long as you know the material you're writing about.

### BREAK IT DOWN!

Most essay questions during exams have a set prompt. Before you do anything else, use your pencil or a highlighter to identify a few key parts of your essay-to-be:

#### 1. What is the overall question the prompt wants you to answer?

- What type of question are you being asked? Essay questions typically are checking to make sure you understand the knowledge you've gained, rather than just being able to recite it.
  - Exploratory words may ask you to explain a difficult concept or explain why a particular piece of information is relevant:
    - Trace
    - Outline
    - List
    - Diagram
    - Solve
    - Define
  - Comparative words ask you to take two topics and write about them in reference to each other:
    - Contrast
    - Compare
    - Distinguish
    - Differentiate
  - Direction words may ask you to defend or argue against an opinion-based issue:
    - Clarify
    - Describe
    - Depict
    - Discuss
    - Explain
    - Survey
    - Defend
    - Argue
    - Debate
    - Contend
    - Justify



#### 2. What details is the question specifically asking you for?

- While the overall question might be how/why or something else to test your understanding, you still need to back it up. Who/what/when/where questions will tell you what details you need to include

#### 3. What is the minimum/maximum length your teacher wants?

- The teacher has to read and grade multiple classes' essays. For some teachers, this will mean they've got 200+ essays to read, so they often will set lengths for essay questions. Pay attention to them because it may result in you being graded down if you don't meet what they're asking for.

### GET ORGANIZED!

Now that you've figured out what you're being asked, you need to figure out what you're answering. If you just write in a long stream without planning, chances are you're going to leave holes in your information that could cost you points. Think of this as a rough sketch for your information. Take the prompt breakdown and write a quick note that reminds you what you want to talk about to answer that part of the question. Write numbers to determine what order you want to present the information so that it makes sense. Write down any key words relevant to the topic that you need to make sure you hit on.

### WRITE CLEARLY!

Sorry, but this one's a twofer. The first part is **making sure you write clearly enough that the teacher can read it**. If they can't read your essay, they don't grade you based on content. When you're in college that means you'll just get a 0 instead of the teacher giving you the benefit of the doubt because she can read a couple of key words that it looks like you got. Print clearly, use a dark-colored ball point pen, don't smudge your paper, and if you have to get rid of a word- use either whiteout or a single line to scratch your information out. The second part of this point is being able to articulate what you're saying- **your writing should also communicate clearly. Use the principles of English composition**, including writing a clear thesis statement and providing clear explanations and details to support your main points. If you have something to list, like statistics, using bullet points within your writing can be a great way to quickly and clearly communicate information. (Use in moderation!)