

Answering Essay Questions

Many students fail to gain the credit possible on essay questions; not because they don't know the answers, but because they don't know how to write answers. The following guide to answering essay questions is designed to help students gain the credit possible if they know the answer. Obviously, such a guide can't help students who are unaware of the answers, but it can increase the credit for the answers they do know.

1. **Read the questions carefully.** This may sound very elementary, but many students start answering questions without fully understanding them. Make sure you understand the question. Pick out key phrases and words, underlining them if necessary. Only when you are sure you understand the question should you go on to the next step.
2. **Organize your answer.** Make sure that you are answering the question as it is asked. Don't go off on a tangent. Outline your answer before you start writing. Use the exam sheet or the cover of the blue book. A series of one-word reminders is adequate, and such an outline not only keeps you from going off on tangents, but helps make your answer more concise and to the point.
3. **Support your answer.** If the question calls for an opinion, state your opinion concisely. Unsubstantiated opinion may be interesting, but will not get you many points. Use information from your readings, your lecture notes, and current news stories (if relevant) to support your opinion. A one or two sentence summary of your basic position at the end of your answer may be helpful, although it is not always necessary.
4. **Budget your time.** Judge how much time to spend on a question by the weight of the question in the exam. A well-organized, well-supported answer to an essay question can still be disastrous if too much time has been used in writing it, and the other questions have to be short-changed. If you can, save a few minutes at the end of the exam period to "proof-read" your exam.
5. **Write legibly.** If you follow the points listed above you should be able to write a good answer. There is one other point to be considered, however, and that is the actual process of putting your answer down on paper. An exam should be a learning opportunity, as well as a method of determining a grade. Therefore you should leave room for the instructor's comments. Write on only one side of each sheet of paper. This will allow the instructor to use the blank side for his comments. If you tend to fill the entire line you are writing in, and run the top of your letters into the bottom of the letters on the line above, write only on every other line. Also, a pencil or a felt-tip pen can smear and be very difficult for the instructor to read. Use a medium-point pen with blue or black ink to write your answers.

Face it, while most instructors attempt to ignore problems they have reading an answer, a well-organized, substantiated answer that is easy to read will get a better grade.