

Module 1- Unit 2

How to Write an Effective Essay

Short answer and essay questions often comprise the most challenging and the most heavily weighted sections of an exam. They require you to analyze and respond to questions, develop coherent arguments, and draw on specific examples, all within a strict time limit. Consider the following techniques to help you to avoid common problems with free responses and improve your answers.

1. Identify the key points:

Highlight the main elements of the question to ensure your answer addresses all necessary aspects.

2. Understand the Question

Many students dive into short answer and essay questions and quickly begin writing their responses. While this may save a few minutes in the short term, it can lead to major problems. Before you can answer a question effectively, you need to make sure that you understand what it is asking you to do.

In order to understand short answer and essay questions, you need to pay particular attention to words like “identify,” “explain,” “compare,” “argue,” “assess”: these words dictate the nature of the task before you. Understanding what you need to include in order to fully answer a question requires you to interpret the degree of complexity and range of information that asks for.

Five Common Types of Questions

There are overlaps and crossovers, of course, but most short answer and essay questions belong primarily in one of these five categories:

Identify questions:

Provide a detailed description of an event, process, or idea. These questions often include words such as Identify, Enumerate, Define, Describe, List, or Summarize. Rather than asking you for your opinion or evaluation, identify questions ask you to accurately recall what you have learned about a topic. These questions are often used on the short answer portion of exams as they elicit concise paragraphs, not fully developed arguments or assessments.

Explain questions:

Analyze why, how, or in what order a set of events or processes occur. These questions often include words such as Explain, Account for, Analyze, Discuss, Trace, or Outline. One is

often expected to establish cause and effect relationships or to develop the steps of a process or series of events in explain questions.

Compare and contrast questions:

Analyze the similarities and differences; answer with an investigation of a relationship. These questions often include words such as Compare, Contrast, Distinguish, and Relate. It is important to note that comparisons generally involve pointing out BOTH similarities AND differences, though you can certainly argue that the two things you are comparing are more similar than they are different or vice versa.

Argue questions:

Answer with a defence of a position that considers potential detractors. These questions often include words such as Argue, Agree, Disagree, Debate, Defend, Justify, and Prove. All essays are forms of argument in the general sense of being developed from a premise towards a conclusion via a structure of support built on logic and evidence. Some, though, are argumentative in the more common sense of requiring that a position be defended against potential detractors.

Assess Questions:

Answer with an evaluation. These questions often include words such as Assess, Criticize, Evaluate, Interpret, Propose, and Review. All essay questions require you to exercise your judgement or powers of discrimination in determining what is relevant or not, significant or not, authentic or not. "Assess" questions require that judgement to become the focus and purpose of the essay. In assess questions, one is frequently asked to measure degree, to answer, "How well?" To do this, sensible criteria must be established against which to judge the subject in question, and then one's judgement must be defended.

3. Write a strong introduction:

Clearly state your thesis statement, which should directly answer the question posed.

4. Use relevant terminology:

Employ the appropriate vocabulary related to the subject matter.

5. Develop your body paragraphs:

Use evidence and examples to support your arguments, ensuring each paragraph focuses on a single key point.

6. Conclude effectively:

Summarize your main points and reiterate your thesis statement, potentially adding a final thought or implication.

7. Time management:

Allocate adequate time to each question based on its weight and the overall exam duration. While you review the examination instructions and questions, it is important to consider how each section or question is graded. Short answers may be worth five or ten marks, and essays can be worth up to fifty marks. Establish priorities for response and set parameters for the amount of time you need to spend on each section and each question.