Essay Exam Prep

A Writing Guide Presentation

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Take a moment to gather any and all information or instructions you have for YOUR upcoming exam. What do you know about it already?

(This info may be found in your syllabus, in your notes, and in what your professor had said about the exam. All info is relevant for us today.)
SPONTANEOUS PERFORMANCE?

NO!

**Abstract:**
A study examined the differences in the essay exam scores of college students who did no planning, some planning, or extensive planning before writing answers to questions on essay exams.

... 

Results indicated that students who did some planning scored better than students who did no planning, and students who did extensive planning scored better than students who did no or some planning.
CR.A.P.G.A.D.R.
(The worst and most helpful acronym of all time!)
What's the CRAPGADR?

C.R. = CLOSE-READ exam info

A = ASSESS your options

P = PHYSICALLY prep

G = GENERATE ideas

A = ARRANGE ideas

D = DRAFT the essay

R = REVIEW the essay
All effective close reading first relies on noticing the most basic and fundamental things.

For this STEP please make observations about the essential facts of the exam.

The Basics:

- What **day** is the exam?
- What **time** is the exam?
- **Where** is it?
- What is the **duration** of the exam?
- What is the **format**? (one long essay, several short?)
- What **materials can you have access to** during the exam?
  - Unlimited notes and materials?
  - Notes (but not textbook)?
  - Textbook only? Are annotations allowed?
  - Limited notes? (e.g. 1pg back & front, 1 index card, etc.)
  - None?
- Is the exam **handwritten** or can you use a **computer**?
- **WHAT OTHER BASIC INFORMATION** SEEMS RELEVANT TO YOU?
One crucial problem with these timed-essay exams can be that students don’t know (as in aren’t give beforehand) the exact question or questions they are meant to answer.

Another issue is that **all tests are not created in the same way**.

The **amount of information** I might have for my ECON midterm may **differently wildly** from the amount of information Maria has for her Contemporary Civilization Midterm.

This is because professors are individual human beings with different teaching styles and learning objectives.

We’re going to talk now about ways you can **learn to recognize learning objectives yourselves, regardless of how explicit any one particular professor IS about them**.
Bloom’s Taxonomy

- **Remember**
  - Recall facts and basic concepts
    - define, duplicate, list, memorize, repeat, state
- **Understand**
  - Explain ideas or concepts
    - classify, describe, discuss, explain, identify, locate, recognize, report, select, translate
- **Apply**
  - Use information in new situations
    - execute, implement, solve, use, demonstrate, interpret, operate, schedule, sketch
- **Analyze**
  - Draw connections among ideas
    - differentiate, organize, relate, compare, contrast, distinguish, examine, experiment, question, test
- **Evaluate**
  - Justify a stand or decision
    - appraise, argue, defend, judge, select, support, value, critique, weigh
- **Create**
  - Produce new or original work
    - design, assemble, construct, conjecture, develop, formulate, author, investigate
CR = CLOSE READ

the exam instructions

The same skills you use to analyse texts you read are useful what your instructor expects and is asking of you for this exam.

For THIS STEP let’s look for less obvious information.

Where do you detect the learning objectives of this exam in the instructions and other information you have at your disposal?

- Can you find **parallels** between the instructions and the categories in Bloom’s taxonomy?
- What **vocabulary** does the instruction use?
- What **skill** listed in the taxonomy does the exam instruction privilege or emphasize?
Your study strategies should be tailored to the purpose and priority of the class and the essay exam itself.

While you may not know the specifics of the CONTENT you will be tested upon, you can devise studying strategies to correspond to what you detect the essay exam will be (or the class overall already is) asking you to DO WITH that content.

- What kinds of scholarly activities do you practice in class?
- What have my previous essay assignments in this particular class asked me to do?
- What kind of in-class engagement is welcomed in discussions?

- What are the most effective ways to study given the expectations you discern? Make strategies for yourself in response to those.
WHICH ONE ARE YOU?

(Take a few moments to detect what applies to YOUR upcoming exam. What is the essay expecting you to do, strategically speaking? Not thinking about specific content.)
P = PHYSICALLY

Prep

You’re going to need your body to get your brain through the exam.

AS A REMINDER:

Think about what you’ll do physically with yourself and your materials.

- How does the day and time affect your preparations?
- What can you do to best prepare yourself to be physically and emotionally ready?
- What are you eating or drinking and when? Or not?
- When are you going to sleep the night before?
- What are you wearing? What’s comfortable?
- Can you arrive early?
- Will you be rushing?

What can I bring with me, and how is it organized?

- Open book/notes does nothing for you if you can't find anything!
- Organization strategies: Color-coding/bookmarks/sticky tabs
- If you have limited space: What is highest priority? Second priority? Lowest priority?
SO THE BIG DAY YOU’VE PREPARED FOR IS FINALLY HERE.
Bear with us:

Live, in the moment of the essay exam, the first task will be to

Do a quick CRAP

On the actual instructions in front of you
Depending on how much you were able to prepare beforehand this can take more or less time.

**Close Read and Assess the prompt, Physically breathe.**

- Do I understand the instructions?
- What are they asking or directing me to do?
- How is it asking me to respond? Demonstrate what skills?
- How might my notes or other materials be useful for me?
- Is it helpful to annotate the question?
  - Underlining key verbs or class concepts, etc.

- **Make a time-management game plan**
  - How much time do I have?
  - How will I divide that time?
  - With what activities?
G = GENERATE

Follow one or more of these Invention Strategies for generating the content of your essay.

INVENTION STRATEGIES

Freewriting
Listing
Questioning
Mind mapping
Looping
A = ARRANGE

Once you have generated potential content think about how you can purposefully structure it.

ARRANGEMENT STRATEGIES

- Numbered list (orders)
- Diagram
- Outline (orders and subordinate)
DRAFTING STRATEGIES

- Trust your PREP. Own your CRAP
- You can choose to skip the **introduction** and come back - leave a few lines (or a half-page in a blue exam book) and then write your introduction there afterwards
- Consider your **page space**: Are you leaving space on the page (in the margins, in between lines, etc.) for later edits? Do you want to?
How do experts’ writing processes translate to essay exam writing?

**WRITING PROJECT**
- Prewrite
- Download your thoughts
- Draft from easy to hard
- **Do multiple drafts**
  - Focus on ideas early, using writer-based prose
  - Focus on style and grammar later
- Proofread at the end

**ESSAY EXAM**
- ?
- ?
- ?
- ?
- ?
- ?

It is widely assumed that the constraints of timed essay exams will make it virtually impossible for students to engage in the major hallmarks of the writing process, especially revision, in testing situations. This paper presents the results of a study conducted at Washington State University in the spring of 2008. The study examined the occurrence of prewriting and revision in 890 timed essay responses as well as the impact of writing process on student scores. It was found that both prewriting and revision occur more frequently in timed essays than was previously realized. While prewriting corresponded to higher scores, revision corresponded to lower scores. These results encourage composition scholars to reevaluate their assumptions about both the validity of timed writing exams and the efficacy of current practices in teaching the writing process.
Revisit the text in local, not global ways.

**REVIEW STRATEGIES**

- Review for local edits and readability (small changes, rather than global/structural/big adjustments)

  - Someone (your instructor) has to read and evaluate this.
    - Don’t obsess about mistakes - flaws are inevitable in these timed-exam situations
    - Whether you misspelled a word is not as important as the quality of the ideas and the execution of your skills (which all this pre-planning allows you to do!)

- Pre-planning helps! trust your pre-planning! OWN YOUR CRAPGADR!
RECAP: What’s the CRAPGADR?

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QUESTIONS?
With images & content from...

- Bloom’s Taxonomy: image from Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching
- Dr. Sue Mendelsohn’s “Dissecting the Essay Exam” presentation