Take a moment to gather any and all information or instructions you have for YOUR upcoming exam.

Syllabus, notes from class, instructor emails, notes from office hours, assignment sheets
Essay Exam Prep

A Writing Guide Presentation

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Today’s Workshop: Essay Exams!

1. How do I figure out what to prepare?
2. How do I prepare?
3. How do I write the essay in the moment?
SPONTANEOUS PERFORMANCE?
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.
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When you think about preparing for an essay exam, you can say:

Oh, CRAP
To prepare for an essay exam, CRAP, and then CRAP again.

C.R. = CLOSE-READ exam info
A = ASSESS the exam objectives
P = PLAN your strategy

C.R. = CLOSE-READ the prompt
A = ASSESS your approach
P = PLAN/PREWRITE before drafting
CR = CLOSE READ
THE EXAM INFORMATION
All effective close reading begins with basic observations.

As a first step, make observations about the essential facts of the exam.

Date: ___When is it?____

Time: ____What time?____

Location: ____Where?____

Duration: ___x___ hours ___x___ minutes

Exam format(s): What formats will the exam include?
- Long essay
- Short essay/response
- Fill in the blank
- Multiple choice

Materials: What materials can you bring? (not sure? ask!)
- Notes? (of any length or limited?)
- Course texts? (with or without annotations?)
- None? (if it doesn’t say, this is the default)

Exam medium: Is it handwritten or taken on a computer?

What other basic information seems relevant?
All effective close reading begins with basic observations.

As a first step, make observations about the essential facts of the exam.

Date: __When is it?____

Time: __What time?____

Location: __Where?____

What is your schedule before the exam on that day?
Can you arrive early?
What are you eating/drinking (or not) before the exam?

When are you going to sleep the night before?
When are you waking up the next morning?
What are you wearing? What’s comfortable?

What can you do to best prepare for yourself to be physically & emotionally ready?
WE NEED TO GO DEEPER
A = ASSESS
THE EXAM OBJECTIVES
A = ASSESS
the exam objectives

Professors may not be explicit about what questions will be on the exam...

...but you may have more information than you think!
Professors may not be explicit about what questions will be on the exam...

...but you may have more information than you think!

A = ASSESS the exam objectives

- Trying to predict the exact question that will be asked
- Determine what tasks the exam is assessing
- Use that to determine what and how we study
- Study strategically
A = ASSESS
the exam objectives

Professors may not be explicit about what questions will be on the exam...

...but you may have more information than you think!

How to determine what tasks the exam is assessing: look for the verbs.

Look for verbs in:

→ Explicit exam information (e.g. “You will analyze a passage you haven’t seen before”)
→ Instructions for previous assignments
→ Class participation instructions
→ The “course objectives” section of a syllabus

Write these verbs in your workbook!
What is my exam asking me to do? (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
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*Oh look, verbs!*
What is my exam asking me to do? (Bloom’s Taxonomy)

- More likely for take-home essay: create
- More likely for multiple choice, true/false, fill-in-the-blank exam questions: remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate
A = ASSESS the exam objectives

Professors may not be explicit about what questions will be on the exam...

...but you may have more information than you think!

What other information do you have that might give you hints as to what the exam will be asking you to do?

- Open book? → it’s not testing REMEMBER!
- Short response? → UNDERSTAND or APPLY are more likely than CREATE or EVALUATE
- Have the full question ahead of time? → more likely to be working at the top (CREATE, EVALUATE, etc.)
- Other info?
P = PLAN
YOUR STRATEGY
Now that we know WHAT is being tested, we can determine HOW to study.

We can plan:

➔ What material to study
➔ How to study that material
➔ How to prepare notes (if allowed)

Space to reflect and plan in the workbook, but you may do that later!
It’s not just about studying content but about what you’re being asked to DO with that content.

➔ What are you being asked to do with the course content in the exam?

➔ What skill are you being asked to demonstrate?

➔ What scholarly activities do you practice in class, during discussions, and in assignments?
**P = PLAN your strategy**

Your study strategies should be tailored to the purpose and priority of the class and the essay exam itself.

Based on what you’re being asked to DO with the content in the exam/course, how can you **study strategically**?

➔ Studying theories & how to tell when they’re relevant
➔ Practicing applying methodologies and noting how to recognize when they can be applied
➔ Studying patterns (rather than memorizing everything)
➔ Noting what evidence is useful for which arguments
Planning and Preparing Your Materials

What are you able to bring? (notes, texts, other?)

Based on what you’re being asked to DO, **what would be most strategic or useful to include in your notes?**

If you have limited space: What is your...

➔ Highest priority? __________________________
➔ Second priority? __________________________
➔ Lowest priority? __________________________

How can you **organize** your materials? How can you make sure you can find what you need when you need it?

➔ Color-coded notes or highlighting?
➔ Sticky tabs to find specific pages?
➔ Bookmarks in a textbook?

*In the workbook!*
Quick recap:

C.R. = CLOSE-READ exam info
A = ASSESS the exam objectives
P = PLAN your study strategy
We CRAP before the exam.
Now we’re going to CRAP again.
Planning effectively during the exam itself

C.R. = CLOSE-READ the prompt
A = ASSESS your approach
P = PLAN/PREWRITE before drafting
CR = CLOSE-READ the prompt

Depending on how much you were able to prepare beforehand, this can take more or less time.

Read the prompt carefully:
- Do I understand the instructions?
- What is this asking or directing me to do?

You may find it useful to annotate the prompt. For example:
- You might underline (or rewrite) the main task you’re being asked to do so it’s front and center.
- You might circle class concepts the prompt mentions, especially if those are things you’re supposed to include in your response.
- Perhaps there’s other key info or requirements you want to mark to make sure you don’t forget.
- You can also underline the verbs of the prompt to give you even more clarity on what you’re being asked to do.
A = ASSESS your approach

Now that you have the actual prompt instructions in front of you, you can decide on or modify your approach.

How will you approach the TASK?

- What is the task? How is the prompt asking me to respond to the question?
- What skills am I supposed to be demonstrating? (hint: check the verbs!)
- Is this in line with the task/skills I prepared for?
- Do I need to modify my approach?
- How might my notes or other materials be useful?

How will you approach your TIME?

- How much time do I have?
- How will I divide that time?
- With what activities?
Research shows that those who plan before drafting score higher on essay exams!

PREWRITING includes two steps:

➔ Generating ideas

➔ Arranging your ideas in a particular order
P = PLAN/ PREWRITE before drafting

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INVENTION STRATEGIES FOR GENERATING IDEAS

Freewriting  Listing  Questioning

Mind mapping  Looping
P = PLAN/PREWRITE before drafting

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ARRANGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR OUTLINING

- Numbered list (orders)
- Diagram
- Outline (orders and subordinate)
TAKE-HOME PROJECTS VS ESSAY EXAMS

WRITING PROJECT
- Prewrite
- Download thoughts
- Draft from easy to hard
- Do multiple drafts
- Early drafts: ideas
- Later drafts: reader
- Proofread at the end

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

“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 … study examined the occurrence of prewriting and revision in 890 timed essay responses as well as the impact of writing process on student scores. … While prewriting corresponded to higher scores, revision corresponded to lower scores.”
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Now you can write the essay!
Some strategies for DRAFTING and REVIEWING

DRAFTING

➔ Use your plan to guide the drafting part of the timed essay exam
➔ 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?

REVIEWING

➔ 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!)
QUESTIONS?
With images & content from...

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