

HOW TO WRITE AN ESSAY

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An essay, compared to objective tests, gives the writer the opportunity to tell the instructor all that he/she knows about a particular subject. Memorizing some things will help, but understanding what you have memorized and heard/read is even more important in writing an essay. Therefore, as much as you can communicate to the instructor what you have learned and understood, the better the instructor will know how well you have mastered the subject matter. Many students get confused on essay tests because they have relied too much on memorizing without understanding what they have memorized. Understanding means an “intuitive” grasp of a subject like one has a natural understanding of one’s job or family. You understand it because you have identified with it and have related concepts to actual experiences.

These steps should serve as a minimal guideline for writing an essay:

1. Read the question carefully.

Don’t be afraid to take time to think about what the question is asking before you begin writing. Think about the meaning of words in the question to help you identify what the question is calling for. Often students quickly read the question and with “test anxiety” immediately begin writing, only to find toward the end that they have not responded to what the instructor was asking, or to only a part of what was asked. Key words in a question are:

Describe: to describe, give as complete and detailed an account of the characteristics, activity, subject, ideas, or concept, etc. as possible. A describe question usually is asking you to give a picture or photograph of some topic with which you should be familiar.

Discuss: to discuss means to engage yourself in a conversation with the instructor, giving both a detailed description of the topic and the problems, effects, implications, issues, etc. involved with it. There is usually room for a presentation of your own ideas and thoughts in a discuss question.

Define: means just that...to provide a clear, concise definition of some term, concept, etc. To define means to be precise enough so that the term, concept, etc. cannot mean anything else.

Explain: to explain means to ask “why?” and “how?” with respect to some topic, event, issue, or theory. An explain question is looking for “what is” and “why” it is. It is not mere description of what is, but the “causes” for it. Explain questions are attempts to engage your mind on the subject, which represents some problem. Your answer should be an attempt to identify the problem and why that problem exists.

Express: express questions usually are asking you to reflect and give your own ideas and thoughts about a subject. Simply stating your opinion is not enough, however. You should follow your opinion or thoughts with reasons for why you think the way you do.

Defend or Argue: to defend or argue is to present a debate on a given statement, issue, or point of view which has at least two sides or points of view. Usually you are being asked to take a point of view and convincingly present facts, theory and logical thinking that such a point of view is the best or most valid. Simply stating “I agree” is not a defense, merely an opinion.

2. *Develop a brief outline.*

If an outline helps, do it. An outline helps in keeping you on track of the subject and question and prevents you from writing about something else. In writing an outline, jot down key words, concepts, ideas, etc. that will “fill in the picture” or photograph that you are attempting to describe, discuss, explain, express, or argue. Then, organize your outline so that one key idea logically follows from the next. This will help you keep your focus and tie things together.

3. *Begin writing, using paragraphs to fill in each-piece of the, picture or photograph.*

Look at an essay as a picture...much as a chapter or lecture on a subject is a picture or photograph of a particular subject. It has a number of parts that need to be described/discussed/explained that function to “fill in” the picture. The more complete and detailed the picture you present, the better the instructor (or anyone) will be able to see the picture that you have in mind, see it clearly, and understand it. Of course, the picture should not only be complete, but be an accurate picture of the subject, demonstrating you have learned something.

A way of going about “painting a picture” is as follows:

- a) The first paragraph: use it as an introduction to them subject. View it as the rough sketch of the picture. An introduction paragraph can be used to provide a clear definition (when that is called for or helpful), present the major ideas or thoughts or arguments, or even to restate the question. “Introduction” means to introduce the subject on which you are writing and it helps you and the reader to “get into” the subject.
- b) Following paragraphs: use each paragraph to present some key idea or view of the subject. Discuss, describe, and explain questions are usually asking you to present the “ins” and “outs,” various ways of looking at, or the different parts of the subject in question. Don’t just define something...explain what it means in your, own words. Don’t just present what you have memorized...go into what it means and how it can be applied in real-life situations. Remember, you are attempting to paint a picture for the instructor, so fill in with as much detail as possible. Use your outline as a guide for developing paragraphs, and see it as pieces of the picture that need to be painted.
- c) Use examples where it helps. An example or illustration will immediately tell the instructor that you have not simply memorized something, but understood it because you can apply it to your own experience and to the present day world by way of examples.

- d) Be concrete. If you know the subject material, you should be able to go to the heart of it and provide detailed information about it. Talking around a subject or about a subject “in general” without pointing to specific words, terms, facts, concepts will tell the instructor that your understanding is vague.
- e) The last paragraph... use it to conclude or sum up your thoughts. Usually this involves a series of statements that tie most or all of the things you have written about in previous paragraphs together. Look at the last paragraph as the “frame” of the picture you have just painted. The test of whether you have answered the question and kept focusing upon it rather than “wandering off” in another direction is whether this concluding paragraph naturally flows from the previous paragraphs.

Now, if there is time, read the question again and then read your essay. Does it answer the question? Does it answer all of the question? Does it make sense to you?

Writing hints:

Assume that the reader is dumb. Don't assume that your instructor knows about the subject and therefore there are some things you need not explain or discuss or define. That means... write as fully and clearly as you can, presenting information that makes sense.

Follow your outline. You can usually use each point on your outline as a paragraph to be developed. Make sure each point in your outline is focused on the question.

Organize your outline. Organize your outline (and thoughts) in some logical, developmental order so that one idea naturally flows from the previous idea. You should write this way so that your meaning is clear to the reader.

Use correct spelling and grammar. A dictionary is often permissible for essay tests.

After having finished writing, read it over. If it doesn't make sense to you (what you have actually written and not what you think you meant or intended to mean) it probably won't make sense to the reader. The only basis of a grade for an essay is what you write and how completely you paint a picture—the reader or instructor cannot read your mind or your intentions.

Finally, a word about “test anxiety.” Assuming you have studied and not crammed the night before, relax. Often, students don't do well on tests, not because they don't know the material, but because they are so “focused” on the test (and grade) that this in itself gets in the way of demonstrating what you know. Best thing to do the night (or day) before for many students is to do something relaxing (assuming you have studied as the course went along). Go to a movie, talk to a tree, or run 5 miles.