



Answering Short Answer and Essay Questions

The Challenge of Free Response Questions

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. While there is no way to instantly excel at responding to short answer and essay questions, there are many techniques that can help you to avoid common problems with free responses and improve your answers.

Exam Basics

Read the Instructions

Every examination requires you to do different things in different ways. It is essential that you read all of the instructions very carefully before you begin to respond to the questions. Where are you to record your answers? How many questions or sections are you required to answer? Also ensure that you have clearly labelled all exam papers with your full name, student number, and instructor's name because papers can be lost, and you do not want to have to write an exam a second time.

Academic Skills, Trent University
Peterborough, ON Canada

Manage your Time

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.

Manage your Stress

You will be better able to control any stress you feel for the exam by taking a few moments to review and plan your approach. Take some deep breaths. Jot a few notes about items you do not wish to forget. And then remember, you are in control, so approach the questions with an eye for detail and a clear direction to show what you have learned in the course.

Analyze the Question

Before you can answer a question, you need to understand it! 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.

www.trentu.ca/academicskills

© 2014

For a full explanation of how to analyze short answer and essay questions, please read [“Understanding Short Answer and Essay Questions,”](#) on the Academic Skills web site.

Plan Your Answer

Once you have a clear sense of what the question is asking you to do, take a few minutes to plan your answer. This planning can take many forms. For short answer questions, you may just need to jot down a couple of key terms on your exam paper. For essay questions, you will likely need to do more planning. You might start by brainstorming ideas or different perspectives.

Sample Planning for a Compare/Contrast Essay of *Midsummer’s Night Dream* and *Twelfth Night*

Similarities Between the Plays:

1. Both have aspects of fantasy
2. Both have happy, romantic endings
3. Both involve characters who are rejected by their loves.

Differences Between Plays:

1. Bottom is not affected by his rejection
2. Malvolio is deeply depressed by it
3. *Midsummer’s* is always romantic comedy
4. *Twelfth Night* is more serious in tone

You then want to write out a thesis and some form of brief outline. Remember, you are aiming for a very rough sketch of your answer;

Academic Skills, Trent University
Peterborough, ON Canada

an outline that turns into a rough draft is a luxury that is normally not worth the time on an exam. Use whatever outlining method you are comfortable with — mind map or conventional hierarchical structure. You may also want to use a chart that lists your main points across from supporting examples rather than a formal outline.

Writing Your Response

Answer the Question as Clearly As Possible

Whatever the question, try to answer it in an organized way. Remember that your professor is reading dozens and dozens of exam papers; your goal is to highlight for him or her that you have fully answered the question as clearly as possible. If you are writing an essay, begin with a very clear thesis statement that directly responds to the question. Whether you are writing a short answer or an essay question, begin each paragraph with a clear topic sentence that explains the main point that you will develop. Use cue phrases such as “for example,” “another example,” or “In contrast” to highlight the fact that you are using specific evidence to support your ideas.

Balance Argument and Evidence

When writing responses to short answer and essay questions, it is important to recognize that arguments and evidence are less valuable when they are separated from one another. A response that lists a long string of facts but that fails to interpret or explain these facts is just as flawed as a response that contains many interesting ideas but that does not support these ideas with specific examples. To avoid these flaws, you need to find a balance between argument and evidence.

Be as Specific as You Can Be Without Being Wrong

Be as specific as possible. Most exam questions will address general course themes, issues that anyone who attended the lectures would be familiar with. To excel on an exam, therefore, you must establish that you are not merely acquainted with these themes, but that you have considered them carefully and are aware of their connections to and ramifications for the more particular material discussed in the course. In a literature course, this means numerous references to the texts studied; in a history course, it might mean using a specific historical event to illustrate a broader theory. In psychology, the student might make reference to relevant experiments, in geography to particular landmarks.

While specific is best, take care not to be wrong. For example, writing “Hitler came to power in 1903,” on a history exam really weakens your credibility. The best response would cite the year correctly: “Hitler came to power in 1933.” If you are not sure, be as specific as you can be without being wrong. For example, “When Hitler came to power in the mid-1930s,” or simply “When Hitler came to power.”

Focus on Course Content

Try to establish for your professor that you have taken the course that was taught. All too often, the student answers a question very personally, making reference to details and issues that were never discussed in class. To a certain extent, this approach is acceptable; it shows an ability to apply knowledge to a broad spectrum. However, overdoing it can be dangerous, because you need to show that you can understand concepts within the framework in which they were discussed, not outside it. Try not to get carried away in your literature course, then, making references to all of the books you

have recently read; focus your answer on the authors you have been studying in class.

Don't Worry Too Much About Style

Many students worry about proper essay style in exams: are they losing marks by not having a formal introduction and conclusion, or by having an answer that looks a bit messy? Some advice: worry about something else. Provide reasonable introductions and conclusions as guides to your response, but do not waste time on them. Professors at this point are marking for content, not style. Elegantly worded introductions are wonderful, but they will likely take up too much time and keep you from completing your essay.

Further, don't waste time “rewriting in good.” Write so that your words can be read at normal speed the first time, and leave it at that. Don't labour excessively over word choice, style and spelling (unless you are using specific vocabulary words that you should know the spelling of) as though you are writing the final draft of an essay. It is perfectly acceptable to cross things out and insert words. If you have any extra time at the end, reread your answers to improve the rough bits of wording, weak transitions, and so on.

For Further Resources

For information about studying for the essay exam and interpreting exam questions, please refer to ASC [online resources](#).