

HOW TO PREPARE FOR ESSAY EXAMS

A GUIDE TO SUCCESS

Purdue University Academic Success Center

OVERVIEW

LEARN TO PREPARE AT HOME FIRST, AND YOU'LL BE A PRO BY TEST DAY.

You can prepare thoroughly for an essay exam at home by following a few simple guidelines.

First, predict the questions you expect on the test by analyzing direction words. (See *pages 11 - 15 for more on direction words and forming questions from titles.*) You can also use this technique to form questions from the main ideas in your lecture notes.

Then, after studying the material, write an answer to the question(s). You will want to review this answer several times and reduce it to an outline that you can memorize and use when you arrive at the exam room.

If your teacher gives you a study guide to prepare for the exam, use the same technique. Review lecture notes and underline/mark in your textbook and then write an answer to each question on the study guide. Then reduce your answers to outlines to memorize.

The following pages look at each of these steps individually and in more detail.

PREDICTING AN ESSAY QUESTION

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LOOK AT CHAPTER TITLES AND SUBTITLES.

To predict a question, look at the key words in the chapter title and subtitles and think about their relationships. Next, try to apply the information to an actual or hypothetical situation.

For example, let's look at a chapter that contains the following titles and subtitles:

A. Body Temperatures and its Regulation

- a. Normal Body Temperature
- b. Heat Gain
- c. Heat Loss
 - i. Processes by which Heat is Lost
 - ii. Avenues of Heat Loss

PREDICTING AN ESSAY QUESTION

COME UP WITH A POSSIBLE QUESTION.

What is it that you think your professor will want you to know about the regulations of body temperature from the chapter title and subtitles listed previously? As you think about this, remember that in most cases it's not enough just to define the terms such as heat loss or be able to list avenues of heat loss, but you must also be able to **apply** how these processes work in different climatic conditions, etc.

A question you might predict would be:

“Explain what you understand about normal body temperatures. Then contrast the processes by which the body uses chemical thermoregulation to gain heat versus physical thermoregulation to lose heat. Finally, analyze the environment factors that must be present in order for a human to maintain normal body temperature.”

WRITING THE ANSWER

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YOU'VE DETERMINED THE QUESTION. NOW FORMULATE AN ANSWER.

First, brainstorm an answer to the question. Jot down key words in outline form that will organize your answer to the question.

An example outline might be:

A. Range of normalcy

B. Thermoregulation

- a) Chemical thermo
 - i. Basal metabolism
- b) Physical thermo
 - i. Radiation
 - ii. Conduction
 - iii. Convection

C. Examples

- a) Humid conditions
- b) Outside temperature
- c) Clothing

WRITING THE ANSWER

NOW PUT IT IN ESSAY FORM.

Now that you have an outline of your intended topics, begin writing your essay response.

Begin by writing a **short** introductory paragraph that answers the question and outlines each paragraph (supporting points) in the body of your essay. As you write this into, try to structure and transition your essay so that it is easy to read and follow.

For example:

“I will explain that normal body temperature is actually a range. Then I will illustrate how basal metabolism in chemical thermoregulation serves to increase body temperature. I will contrast that to heat loss in which physical thermoregulation affects the processes of radiation, conduction, and convection. Finally, I will discuss some climactic factors that must be present for a human to maintain normal body temperature.”

WRITING THE ANSWER

BE THOROUGH, BUT CONCISE.

Note that each introductory sentence above responds to the direction words in each of the three parts of the above question – explain, contrast, and analyze. Also, the writing did not just repeat key words like “normal body temperature” but indicated what the answer will be. In our example, “there is no one body temperature, but a range.”

Now move on to the rest of the essay. Write a separate paragraph to expand and support the ideas in the body of your essay. A paragraph should consist of 6-7 sentences. It should not be either one word or a whole page. In our example, you would write three more paragraphs in the body of this essay. One paragraph will explain what a normal body temperature is and how it may change. The next paragraph will note the differences between the processes in physical and chemical thermoregulation. The last paragraph may give examples of outside temperatures, apparel, or other factors that would affect a human’s ability to survive.

ADDITIONAL TIPS

MORE ON HOW TO WRITE AN AWESOME ESSAY.

Use language that is clear and direct. Do not try to “fluff” your answer with a lot of extraneous information.

Follow the outline you jotted down.

Use terms used in lecture and in the textbook as applicable. These terms best describe the processes being discussed and will be meaningful to your professor.

Use as many examples and facts as possible to support your thesis.

Do not give your opinion unless it is asked for by the essay question directions words (e.g. justify, prove, etc.).

ANALYZING DIRECTION WORDS

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CLUES TO HELP YOU KNOW WHAT TO WRITE

Essay question direction words help you both to predict good essay questions at home and to thoroughly understand and correctly answer essay questions in the exam room. On the following pages, they have been categorized according to their level of difficulty.

For the first group, it is often enough to simply memorize and correctly explain a term.

For the second group, you must be able to see the relationships between ideas and terms.

In the third group, you are being asked to apply the information in a new situation or critically analyze a situation giving your own opinion.

The more deeply you study and prepare at home using all three levels of questions, the better prepared you will be for an essay exam.

ANALYZING DIRECTION WORDS

EASIEST

Group 1: At the definition level

Direction Word	Meaning
Describe	Write a detailed account or verbal picture in logical sequence.
Discuss	Describe, giving the details and explaining the pros and cons of it.
State	Describe the main points in precise terms. Be formal. Use brief, clear sentences. Omit details and examples
Define/Explain	Give the formal meaning by distinguishing it from related terms. This is often a definition to memorize.
List/Enumerate	Produce a numbered list of words, sentences, or comments.
Trace	Follow the progress or history of the subject.

ANALYZING DIRECTION WORDS

HARDER

Group 2: At a deeper, more interpretive level

Direction Word	Meaning
Compare	Show both the similarities and differences.
Contrast	Compare by showing the differences.
Diagram	Make a graph, chart, or drawing. Be sure to label and add brief explanation if necessary.
Illustrate	Means to explain or make it clear by concrete examples, comparisons, or analogies.
Summarize	Give a brief account of the main ideas. Omit details and examples.
Outline	Give a general summary. It should contain a series of main ideas supported by secondary ideas. Show organization. Omit details.

ANALYZING DIRECTION WORDS

HARDEST

Group 3: At the deepest level, applying and evaluating information

Direction Word	Meaning
Review	Give a survey or summary in which you look at the important parts and criticize where needed.
Prove	Show by argument or logic that it is true. The word “prove” has a special meaning in mathematics and physics.
Interpret	Give the meaning, using examples and personal comments to make the ideas clear.
Evaluate	Give your opinion or some expert’s opinion of the truth or importance of the concept. Tell the advantages and disadvantages.
Justify	Give a statement of why you think it is so. Give reasons for your statement or conclusion.