ESSAY TESTS

Essay tests are common in college-level courses, especially in the humanities and sciences. They allow instructors to test students’ abilities in remembering, organizing, and evaluating information. Essays contain relatively subjective questions, because there is no one specific answer that is correct. Though the instructor usually looks for certain points to be made in the answer, there are varying degrees of correctness. Sometimes instructors will accept as correct
some answers that diverge from common interpretations, as long as the answers are logically and substantively supported.

The following strategies for taking essay tests are presented in the chronological order they should be used before taking the exam.

Pre-Test Preparation

Before the test, practice writing answers to sample essay questions. Make up your own questions, or consult the textbook or workbook for sample questions. Work with another student to write questions for each other. When answering sample essay questions give yourself the same amount of time you will have during the actual test. Don’t refer to your study materials when answering sample essays.

It is also important to find out, before the test, who will be grading the answers. If the instructor is grading the test, find out what types of answers he/she prefers. Does he/she look for facts, for ideas, or for supported interpretations? If someone other than the instructor, a teaching assistant for example, is grading the test, avoid reinterpreting concepts and presenting unpopular viewpoints. Give lots of facts and examples instead.

Read the Directions Carefully

Many points on essay tests are lost because students fail to read the directions carefully. Pay attention to the following points when reading directions:

- Are you to answer every question or do you have choices?
- Where are you to write your answers: on the test, on lined paper, in a blue book?
- How are you to write your answers: skip a line, one side of page only, etc.?
- Do you need to include a certain number of ideas?
- Are you supposed to write a certain amount of information: a few sentences, a paragraph, etc.?
- Are you supposed to include dates?
- Are you supposed to include examples?
Are you supposed to include the names of important people?

Key words to look for in the directions are listed below (Kesselman-Turkel and Peterson, 1981, p.102). Be sure to know what these words mean.

- Synonym
- Antonym
- None of
- Similar to
- The same as
- All of
- The opposite of
- Assume that
- If
- All but one
- Only one correct choice

Budget Your Time

Decide how to divide all available time among the questions. Plan to spend more time on questions that count for more points; spend equal time on questions with the same point value. Allow time to check answers after completing all questions. For each question, allow half of the time for writing an outline and half for writing the answer.

Read All Questions Before Answering Them

Reading all the questions before answering them allows one’s brain to begin processing information. Reading before answering is especially important when one has a choice of questions to answer. Reading out loud helps to reinforce the material.

Determine what information is given, what information is requested for the answer, and how you are to answer the question (e.g. compare, contrast, prove, summarize, etc.). Break down complex questions into smaller parts, numbering each to make sure all parts are answered. Jot down a few notes as you read each question. If you don’t understand a question, ask the instructor for clarification.

Closely Examine Instructions for Directional Words

Essay questions often contain verbs asking students to do certain things with the information. Students must know what these words mean in order to provide the information that the instructor
wants. The most commonly used directional words and their definitions are provided below. Be aware of variations on these words that are specific to certain instructors; not all instructors use the words in the same way. If unsure, ask the instructor for clarification.

- Analyze: Break the subject into its component parts and discuss each part (Lunenfeld and Lunenfeld, 1992).
- Compare: Show how they are the same and how they differ.
- Contrast: Show how they differ.
- Criticize: Examine the pros and cons and give your judgment.
- Defend: Give details that prove it or show its value.
- Define: Just give the meaning.
- Describe: Give the details and examples that show what it is.
- Discuss and review: Examine from all angles. (These words are catchalls. Depending on the teacher, they might mean trace, outline, describe, compare, list, explain, evaluate, defend, criticize, enumerate, summarize, or tell all you know about it.)
- Distinguish: Tell how this is different from others similar to it.
- Evaluate: Give your opinion as to the advantages and disadvantages.
- Explain and show: Show, in logical sequence, how or why something happened (or both).
- Illustrate: Give examples.
- Justify: Give the facts and then prove it’s true.
- Name, list, tell, and enumerate: Give just the information that is specifically asked for.
- Prove: Show that it is true and that its opposite is false.
- Summarize and outline: Give the main points.
Trace: Show how something developed step by step (usually chronologically).

**Pick a Title**

Select a title for each essay answer. Titles help to keep one on track while writing the answers. In other words, titles help one avoid straying from the topic of the question and including irrelevant information. Each title should contain the following information: topic, point of view or approach, and boundaries (temporal, spatial) of the topic. For example, if the question asks “Compare and contrast British colonial policies in different parts of the world,” the title to the answer might be “Similarities and Differences Between British Policies in Asian and African Colonies in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries.”

**Organize (Outline) the Answer**

Good essay writers spend half of their time formulating an outline before answering a question. This may seem like a large investment of time, but outlining insures that each response is organized and answers the question asked. If one has prepared for the exam by reorganizing information or by making up and answering practice essay questions, the organizing process is completed ahead of time and precious testing time is saved.

Divide the outline into general points and specific details. The general points usually are taken from the information in the question, or one may restate the different parts of the question. The student supplies the specific details under the appropriate general points. If the essay questions had been anticipated, try to remember the outline you prepared before the exam.

Organize the main points of the outline. The structure chosen depends on the question and the discipline. Complete details on essay organization are given in the Writing and Proofreading page, but brief descriptions of five common methods of organization are given below:

- **Chronological Order**—order of historical events, cause to effect, step-by-step sequence

- **From General to Specific**—general topic to subtopics, theoretical to practical, generalizations to specific examples

- **From Least to Most**—easiest to most difficult, smallest to largest, worst to best, weakest to strongest, least important to most important, least complicated to most complicated, least effective to most effective, least controversial to most controversial

- **From Most to Least**—most known to least known, most factual to least factual (fact to opinion)
Giving Both Sides (Grouped or Interspersed)-pros and cons, assets and liabilities, similarities and differences, hard and easy, bad and good, effective and ineffective, weak and strong, complicated and uncomplicated, controversial and uncontroversial

Remember that outlining is not the only way to organize information. One may choose to organize the main ideas and specific details for the essay in an alternate format, such as a herringbone map, a matrix or table, a hierarchy or array, a flow chart, or a spider map.

Get Active

Get actively involved in your essay, showing enthusiasm in your answer. Recall personal experiences related to the topic or exciting lectures, books and movies that interested you in the subject. While these won’t be part of your answer, they help to get you in the right state of mind.

Write Methodically

Write your answer as if you were writing a mini term paper. Your answer should have a title, an introduction or topic statement, a body, and an ending or conclusion.

- Tips for selecting an appropriate title were discussed previously.
- Your topic statement can be a reworking of the title.
- The body should include at least one paragraph for each general point in your outline. Each paragraph in the body should begin with a general summary sentence, usually a complete sentence containing the information in the outline. Skip a line between paragraphs.
- Your ending can be a summary of the answer, a restatement of the topic sentence, or your interpretations or opinions. Do not introduce new information in the ending.

Use ample details and examples in the answer. Use clear labeling words, such as examples, comparisons, similarities, contrasts, differences, supports, arguments, reasons, most, probably, main point, exceptions, etc. Underline key words.

Think in three’s: three paragraphs, three sentences per paragraph, three examples per main point, etc. Avoid one-sentence paragraphs. Be direct and to the point.
Don’t waste space

Although it’s a good idea to skip lines between paragraphs, don’t skip lines between sentences or use only one side of the paper unless told to do so. Avoid ornate or illegible handwriting that takes up a lot of room on the paper. Don’t try to fill up extra test booklets by wasting space. Some graders interpret wasted space as a cover up for not knowing the material.

Check Your Work

You should have allotted time for checking your answers. For content, did you answer the question, and did you stick to your point of view? For organization, did you answer all parts of the question, and are paragraphs and sentences logically ordered? For writing, is your answer clear, is you writing legible, is your grammar correct, and is your punctuation correct?

If You Prepared for the Different Questions

Sometimes students anticipate that certain questions will be asked, but the test questions turn out to be different. When this happens, make sure you have completely answered the questions you do know. Then look for ambiguity in the questions you don’t know, since lack of clarity may allow some leeway in your answer. Stretch what you do know about the topic by giving many examples and comparisons. Add less relevant information by linking it with general statements.

If You Run Out of Time

If you are running out of time and haven’t yet answered all questions, write down the outlines and indicate that you ran out of time for that/those question(s). Some instructors will give partial credit for outlines.

VOCABULARY TESTS

Vocabulary tests evaluate students’ abilities to define key terms and, less often, major concepts. One advantage for students is that vocabulary tests are fairly easy to prepare for with practice. Use the vocabulary lists at the end of the textbook chapters, or make up your own vocabulary list using the bold words in the text and key words from lecture.

If You Know the Word, Watch for Word Traps

Be wary of words with similar meanings (e.g. hypothesis and theory) and words that look similar (e.g. physiology and psychology, sulfide and sulfate). Pay attention to grammar; for example, if the question makes reference to a noun, the answer should be a noun.
If the Word Looks Familiar, But You’re Not Sure

Try to use the word in a sentence. Picture the word in your notes or book, or remember when it was discussed in lecture. Then try to remember what information was discussed in relation to the word.

If You Don’t Know the Word, Make an Educated Guess

Examine the word elements (suffix, prefix and root word) for clues. Look for grammatical clues. Try to associate the unknown word with words you know. Make use of any foreign languages you know, looking for cognates.

MATCHING TESTS

Matching questions are particularly effective for testing students’ knowledge of terms and definitions, people and their contributions, dates and important events, and other numerical information. Matching questions are classified as objective.

Read the Directions Carefully

The directions for matching questions usually contain vital information including whether questions only have one answer or more than one answer, if responses may be used only once or more than once, and how answers are to be written (on an answer sheet, on blanks on test, draw lines to match items, etc.).

Read the Column with the Longest Phrases First

To save time, read through the column with the longest phrases first. Then read and reread the shorter column to match the two.

Do the Easy Questions First

Match the items that you know for sure first, marking off the choices as you use them. If answers can only be used once, this reduces the number of choices to select form for the unknown questions.

Do the Difficult Questions Next

Try the process of elimination, crossing off known items first. Try to visualize information in the notes or textbook, or try to associate the questions with things you do know. Look for clues in
grammar or tense. If answers may be used more than once, look at the items that have been used already to answer the easy questions; an instructor probably wouldn’t indicate that answers could be used more than once unless some of them are. Then concentrate on the answers that have not yet been used.

Write Explanations

If you are unsure of any of your answers, write a brief explanation of your answer in the margin of the test. Clearly indicate the question number to which you are referring.

FILL-IN AND SHORT ANSWER TESTS

Fill-in the blank questions are most often used to evaluate students’ recall of details like dates, terms, and people. If well written, fill-ins should be objective questions, having only one correct answer. Short answer questions, on the other hand, help to evaluate students’ understanding of concepts and are more subjective. Despite these differences, similar strategies may be used when answering fill-in and short answer tests.

Read the Questions Carefully

Be sure to understand what the question is asking; refer to the list of instructional terms and definitions in the Essay Tests section of this page. Underline key words and phrases. Break complex questions into smaller parts and evaluate each part separately.

Look for Clues

Look at the grammar and tense of the questions for clues to the answer. Is the answer a noun, a verb, a qualifier? [Tip: It is a noun if you put the word “the” in front and it makes sense, and it is a verb if it makes sense with “to” in front.] Is it singular or plural? Other questions on the test may provide contextual clues.

Don’t Overanalyze the Questions

Don’t read too much into the wording of the question, but take note of the clues listed above.

Watch the Blanks

The number of blanks, and sometimes their length, may be a clue to the answer in terms of the number of words, and perhaps the length of the words.
Think of the Type of Information Requested

Is the instructor looking for a technical term, a person, and a number? When two items are compared, is the instructor looking for a qualifier such as increasing, decreasing, less, more, etc.? Does the instructor want you to define, describe, illustrate, or summarize?

Make Educated Guesses

Examine the key words and phrases in the question; picture them in your notes or try to remember hearing the instructor talk about them. Try to remember what other ideas were discussed in relation to these key words. Again, consider the context and grammar of the question.

Overanswer

If you think two answers may be correct, write down each with a brief explanation in the margin. If you have time, write more than the directions indicate, unless told otherwise.

IDENTIFY AND EXPLAIN TESTS

Identify and explain tests are somewhat subjective questions requiring that students write a few sentences summing up the important aspects of the topic. The identification words may be people, places, things, or concepts.

Use Descriptive Words

To convey extra meaning with only a few words, use descriptive words to describe the topic. For example, instead of saying Patton was a general, write that Patton was an infamous general. On the other hand, if one is unsure of the specifics of a topic, use general words to describe it. For example, if one can’t remember that Archduke Francis Ferdinand was the heir to the throne in Austria, say that he was a national leader in Eastern Europe.

Give Temporal and Spatial Details

Whenever possible, indicate the temporal or spatial specifics of the topic. If exact dates or places cannot be remembered, use general terms. For example, if one forgets that Darwin’s Origin of Species was published in 1859, write that the book was published in the mid-nineteenth century. In one can’t remember the exact country (Cambodia) in which the Khmer empire arose, write that it was in Southeast Asia.
Explain the Significance

As specifically as possible, give at least one reason why the topic is important. One may use general terms if the exact significance of the topic is uncertain. In this case, add a specific date or statistic to make the answer appear more detailed.

**STANDARDIZED TESTS**

Standardized tests include ACT, SAT, GRE, PPST, GMAT, and LMAT. They are used to assess students’ knowledge in the areas of reading, math, and science as well as in specific content areas. Good performance on standardized tests is important because they are a condition for acceptance into most undergraduate and graduate programs or they may be required to obtain certification. Standardized tests are timed; meaning students are given a certain amount of time to complete each section of the test.

**Prepare**

Study materials can be purchased for some tests such as GRE and GMAT. The study guides provide sample questions as well as strategies for improving one’s performance. Send for these materials early as the requests may take weeks to process. For reading comprehension, one may practice on one’s own, using the strategies discussed in Reading Comprehension Tests section of this page.

**Read the Directions Carefully**

Some standardized tests are graded with “rights only” while others deduct points for incorrect answers. Read the directions carefully to determine how the test is scored, how much time is given per section, how answers are to be recorded, etc.

**Study Sample Questions**

Most standardized tests provide sample questions and answers for each section of the test. Study these carefully to get an idea of what the questions are looking for and how to mark your answers.

**Work Quickly**

Most standardized tests are speed tests, meaning only the best students will be able to complete the entire test during the allotted time. Spend the same amount of time on each question. For example, if there are 30 questions in a section and you are given 60 minutes to complete the section, spend no more than 2 minutes on each question. If you don’t know the answer after
Like take-home tests, open-book tests may be more difficult than closed-book tests because the instructor usually has higher expectations of the quality and quantity of information to be written by students. Therefore, don’t take open-book tests lightly. Prepare for them as seriously as one would for closed-book tests.

**Preparation**

Poor performance on open-book tests may be due to running out of time, as students waste time looking for things in the book. To avoid this, prepare thoroughly before the test. Make sure you know where everything is in the book. Mark important pages with paper clips. Or better yet, use tabs or “post-it” notes to briefly describe and label important sections of the text. Become familiar with using the index for looking up specific topics. Prepare summaries of major concepts, listing key points and relevant page numbers. Tape the summaries into the book.

**Work Through the Test Quickly**

If you can’t find the answer after a few minutes of searching in the book, flag the question and move on. Return to that question as time permits, after you have completed the other questions. Remind yourself to work quickly, avoiding excessive search time in the book.

**Avoid Plagiarism**

Plagiarism, or using someone else’s ideas without giving them credit, is against the students’ codes of all schools. In many cases, plagiarism is grounds for dismissal from school. Do not take direct quotes from a printed source without using citations on open-book test. Paraphrase the information and cite the page number from which the material was taken.

Plagiarism is covered in more detail in the Writing and Proofreading page.

**NUMBER PROBLEMS**

Tests in some courses such as math or statistics may be comprised completely of number problems. In other courses like accounting, chemistry, geology, and physics, a significant
number of test questions may take this form.

Work Systematically

If the directions indicate that you are not penalized for arithmetic mistakes, spend less time on accuracy and checking answers and spend more time on setting the problem up correctly. If arithmetic errors are counted off your score, do the following. Write all numbers carefully, especially 2 and 5, 4 and 9, and 1 and 7. Write numbers in columns with the decimal points in line. Recopy answers from scrap paper very carefully. Watch units of measurement. If permitted use a calculator for all arithmetic, even the simplest operations. Leave enough time to check answers, following the guidelines listed in a subsequent paragraph.

Organize Your Work

Make a list of all the numbers and variables given to you in the problem. Determine what you are supposed to find or calculate. Identify the formula(s) needed to solve the problem. Use pictures and graphs as needed to interpret the question, and label the visual aids with the data provided in the problem. Estimate what the answer should be before you solve the problem. What will be the relative size of the number? Will it be positive or negative?

Use All Information Given in the Problem

In most cases, all of the data provided in the question will be needed to solve the problem.

Study Visual Aids Carefully

If graphs and figures are given in the problem, study them carefully. Is the graph origin at (0,0)? What are the intervals for the axes? Are any numbers skipped on the axes? What are the units of measurement?

Don’t Quit

When you run into trouble setting up the answer or solving the formulas, don’t give up. Substitute real numbers for the variables to see if the question makes more sense. Think of real-life situations when the formulas or concepts were used. If fractions are a problem, substitute rounded numbers or decimals for them.

For Multiple choice Tests
Some number problems ask that students solve the problem and choose an answer from a multiple-choice list. In this case, cover the answers until you have worked the problem. This helps to reduce biases in the way that you set up the problem [unless, of course, you don’t know how to set up the problem]. Estimate what the answer should be. As a general rule, eliminate answers that are very high or very low, especially if you have to guess at the answer.

**Check Your Answers**

Always budget time to go over your answers. Reread the directions and each question. Make sure you have answered all parts of the question and have used the correct units of measurement. Does your answer make sense, given the information in the problem? Compare the estimated and calculated answers. If time permits, rework the problem using another method. If time permits, reenter numbers into the calculator to check for accuracy. Check all decimal places and signs. For inequalities, try substituting other numbers besides the answer to see if they make sense.

**READING COMPREHENSION TESTS**

An important component of most standardized tests like ACT and SAT is reading comprehension. This section outlines strategies to help one prepare for the reading comprehension sections of standardized tests. Because respectable standardized test scores are necessary for admission into undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs, it is important to perform well on the reading comprehension portions of these tests.

Reading comprehension tests usually contain excerpts of text a few hundred words in length. Topics of the text vary widely from popular culture to natural science to current politics. Each passage is followed by several questions based on the text. The number of questions is proportional to the length of the passages.

Three strategies for improving performance on reading comprehension tests are, knowing typical questions on reading comprehension, reading the passage before the questions, and practicing reading skills (REFERENCE). Other strategies such as underlining and annotating are discussed.

For more strategies, see the Reading Comprehension Tests section of the Test Taking page.

**Typical Reading Comprehension Questions**

Students should become familiar with the main categories of reading comprehension questions asked on standardized tests. Having these question types in mind will help to focus one’s attention while reading the passages.
Reading comprehension questions usually take one of three forms: questions based on the entire passage, questions based on section of the passage, and questions based on particular words or sentences. Each of these is discussed and exemplified below (REFERENCE).

Questions Based on the Entire Passage

Questions based on the entire reading usually target the main point of the text, author intentions, main ideas, and content. Ten types of questions based on the entire passage are given below along with sample wordings from SAT questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTION TYPE</th>
<th>SAMPLE WORDING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main Point:</td>
<td>The passage is mainly concerned with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the passage trying to tell you?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Purpose of Author:</td>
<td>The author’s primary purpose in the passage is to…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does the author want to tell you?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mood or Attitude of Author:</td>
<td>On the basis of the passage, the author’s attitude toward--can most accurately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the tone or attitude of the author?</td>
<td>be termed as one of…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assumptions Made by Author:</td>
<td>Which of the following is an assumption made by the author?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What assumptions are made by the author but not directly stated in the passage?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications of Passage or Author:</td>
<td>The author implies that ___ is…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does the author or the passage imply?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applications of Main Ideas:</td>
<td>The author provides information that would answer all of the following</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How can you extend the main ideas of the passage?</td>
<td>questions except…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Passage:</td>
<td>Which of the following titles best summarizes the content of the passage?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a few words, how would you describe the passage? What title would you give the passage?</td>
<td>Which of the following would be the most appropriate title for the passage?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Questions Based on Sections of the Passage

In order to answer questions on specific sections of the passage, one must be able to identify and understand the main points in each paragraph. Look for cue words like advantages, disadvantages, similarities, differences, in contrast with, in comparison to, most importantly, primarily, and on the other hand.

Questions based on portions of the text usually deal with inferences, applications, and implications of the information. Six types of questions based on sections of the passage along with sample wordings from SAT questions are given in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTION TYPE</th>
<th>SAMPLE WORDING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inferences:</td>
<td>It can be inferred that the ancient’s atomic theory was primarily based on…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applications:</td>
<td>The author provides information that answers which of the following questions?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Precedes or Follows Passage:</td>
<td>It can be inferred that in the paragraphs immediately preceding the passage, the author discussed…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tone or Mood: At the conclusion of the passage, the author’s tone is one of…

Questions Based on Words, Phrases or Sentences

Specific details and pieces of information may be the subject of test questions. The content itself is not usually the subject of questions. Rather, the reasons for using the information or the meanings of the information are usually the subject of questions.

Two types of questions based on words, phrases, or sentences are listed in the following table along with sample wordings from SAT questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTION TYPE</th>
<th>SAMPLE WORDING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reason for Use:</td>
<td>The author mentions Newton’s <em>Principis</em> in order to…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why are certain words, phrases, or sentences mentioned or used in the passage?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning of a Word or Phrase:</td>
<td>The enemy referred to in the last sentence is probably…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| What is the meaning of a certain word, phrase, or sentence in the passage? | According to the author, the words in the Declaration of Independence, “all men are created equal,” are meant to represent…  
|                               | By “this skepticism” (line 35), the author means…                             |

Read Passages Before Questions

Some authors (e.g. Lunenfeld and Lunenfeld, 1981) contend that one should look over the questions before reading the passage, arguing that it saves time and focuses one’s attention on certain information. But others argue that for standardized tests this practice is probably a waste of time. Because standardized tests are timed, it is important to move through the passages and questions efficiently.

If one is familiar with the common types of questions asked on standardized tests, as described on the previous tables, one will already know what to expect. “Reading the passage first forces you to get involved with the passage and with the intent of its author. By getting involved you will, in fact, anticipate many if not all of the questions that follow the passage” (REFERENCE, p. 40). If
one reads the questions first, one will be tempted to move too quickly through the passage looking for the answers. As a result, the intentions and tone of the author will be lost. It is also likely that the general theme of the entire passage will be misunderstood.

*Practice Reading Skills*

One of the best ways to prepare for reading comprehension tests is to practice. It is relatively easy to find reading materials appropriate for standardized test preparation. One might also work with a buddy, finding passages and making up questions for each other.

Locate passages of text about three to six paragraphs in length from the following sources: newspaper stories, newspaper editorial, newspaper political columns, essays and columns in news magazines like *Time* or *Newsweek*, science fact magazines, encyclopedia articles, nonfiction books, and general interest magazines like *Reader’s Digest*. Read a passage, keeping in mind the common types of standardized test questions discussed previously. After completing the reading, make up questions based on the entire passage, on sections of the passage, and on specific words or sentences. Then answer your own questions.

An example of practicing reading comprehension is outlined below. Questions and answers follow the sample passage of text (REFERENCE).

**ORAL TESTS**

Familiarize yourself with the main ideas that may be covered by the test. What were the main ideas and concepts presented in lecture? In the book? How would you discuss them? Try to predict what the exam questions may be, and develop an outline or summary of the main points and supporting details to answer each question.

*Listen Carefully to the Questions*

If allowed, take notes as you are given the question. Pay particular attention to key words, directional words, and multiple parts of the question. Rephrase the question so it corresponds to what you know about the subject. Ask for clarification if you don’t understand the question. Take a few minutes to collect your thoughts.

*Focus on a Topic*

Instead of saying a little about several things, try to narrow the topic and discuss it in detail with many statistics, dates, or examples. When narrowing the topic, consider the major points from lecture and/or the section headings in the textbook.
Think in Threes

Try to include three main points about the topic, and support each point with three specific details.

Attend to Appearance

One’s appearance can greatly influence impressions on the instructor. Wear appropriate clothes, like a skirt or dress pants. When in doubt about what to wear, err on the side of overdressing. Iron your clothes and be well groomed. Use body gestures that indicate confidence: maintain eye contact, stand quietly but not rigidly, and maintain an even tone of voice.

Use Appropriate Language

Find a “happy medium” in the language used in the answer. Using complicated words that are misused or mispronounced will not impress anyone. Avoid talking down to the audience as well. Instead, try to use language that conveys enthusiasm for the subject.

If You Don’t Know the Answer

If you don’t know the answer to the question, admit it and explain why. Perhaps the question is beyond the material to be covered by the exam. Or maybe you can’t answer that specific question but you can discuss a related topic. Try not to panic. Instead, make a statement like, “That is an interesting question. I don’t recall that topic being covered in lecture, but it seems to be related to another issue we discussed in class…”

Make a Good Exit

After answering the question, wait to be dismissed by the instructor. Don’t forget to collect your notes and say “thank you.”

Practice

Work individually or with other students to practice answering test question orally. Make up your own questions, or refer to review questions in the textbook or wordbook. Practice in front of a mirror or video camera for feedback on your style of presentation. Record the answers on audiocassettes for feedback on the content and organization of the answer. Give yourself the same amount of time you will be given in class.

TAKE-HOME TESTS
Take-home tests are a special variety of essay exams, the difference being take-homes are completed outside of class. They share the other characteristics of essay tests: subjective, evaluate students’ understanding of concepts, evaluate students’ abilities to interpret and apply information, and evaluate students’ abilities to organize information. Therefore, refer to the essay test strategies in this page for more ideas related to take-home tests.

Synthesize

Instructors usually grade take-home tests, in part, on the students’ abilities to synthesize information from a variety of sources, especially the lecture notes and the textbook. It is therefore necessary to include information from all relevant sources, including outside readings, movies, and guest speakers, in your answers. Your answers should demonstrate that you have consulted all these sources of information.

Avoid Plagiarism

Plagiarism, or using someone else’s ideas without giving them credit, is against the student codes of all schools. In many cases plagiarism is grounds for dismissal from school. Do not take direct quotes from a printed source without using citations on take-home tests. Avoid excessive use of the words and ideas of others.

Plagiarism is covered in more detail in the Writing and Proofreading page.

Proofread

Never turn in a take-home test without proofreading it or having someone else look it over. More will be expected in the way of organization, logical transitions between ideas, grammar, punctuation, and spelling on take-home tests compared to in-class exams. Do not lose points for these types of errors. Run the spell checker and grammar checker on your computer or word processor. Ask a qualified person, like a tutor or an English major, to look over the answers for grammar (not content).

Do Your Own Work

Instructors can easily spot take-home test completed by students who worked together. In some cases, students will be penalized for having similar answers that suggest cooperative work, especially if students were instructed to work on their own. Be on the safe side; write your own answers. Make your test unique. Make it stand out from the others.

Keep Copies
Make a copy of your test answers before you turn in the test. This way you will have proof that the test was completed in case the instructor misplaces your exam. Make a back-up copy of the disk on which the test was saved. Once the test is returned, keep it until the final grade has been received in case there are problems with your grade.

Don’t Wait Until the Last Minute

Take-home tests are not necessarily easier than in-class essay tests just because you may consult notes and readings. In fact, they are usually more difficult because you have to write more, include more details, and make critical evaluations.

Take-home tests require a significant time commitment. Begin the test early enough so you have plenty of time to do a first draft, have it proofed, do a final draft, and have it printed.

Don’t wait until the last minute to print. Inevitably, that is when the printers will be occupied or broken. If the printers are down and you have reached the test deadline, ask the instructor if you can turn in a copy of your disk and bring in the printed version as soon after as possible. Or the instructor may accept an e-mailed copy until the printers are fixed.

MULTIPLE CHOICE TESTS

The multiple-choice format is commonly used in testing because the exams are relatively easy to grade and the questions effectively evaluate students’ knowledge of facts and understanding of concepts. This is an objective form of testing since, if the questions are well written, there is only one correct answer to each question, leaving little room for interpretation.

Work Quickly

By working quickly through multiple choice tests, one insures that the test is completed in time and that questions are not over-interpreted, with hidden meanings read into them. Read each question only once, underlining key words as one reads. Break complicated questions into smaller segments, so that the answer choices may be checked against each part. Cross out unimportant or irrelevant parts of the question. If you are unable to answer the question after your first reading, mark it for later consideration as time allows.

Consider the Instructor

If the directions indicate that one should choose the “best” answer to each question, pick the one that the instructor (not you) would think is most correct. Be wary of “all of the above” and “none
of the above” responses, since some instructors use these choices when they can’t think of another content-related answer to use.

**Guess Before Choosing**

Decide what the answer to each question should be before looking at the answer choices. Then examine the choices and pick the answer that most closely matches your answer. If none of the choices is similar to your guess, carefully study the answers looking for keywords and other clues. Choose simple answers even if they seem obvious. And remember, never pick an answer without first reading all of the choices, no matter how sure you are of the answer.

**Eliminate Unlikely Answers**

Cross off answers that are only partly correct or only partially answer the question. Eliminate answers that are correct but do not answer the question. If you know for sure that one response is not true, eliminated “all of the above” as a possible answer.

**Look for Clue Words and Numbers**

The following clues apply to many multiple-choice questions.

- If two answers are opposites, one of them is probably correct.
- Answers with the following words are usually incorrect: always, never, all, none.
- Answers with the following words are usually correct: seldom, generally, most, tend to, probably, usually.
- Look for grammatical clues between the question and the choices. For example, the question and correct answer often have verbs of the same tense and have nouns and verbs that agree.
- Underline familiar words or phrases from the lecture or textbook.
- Be aware of degrees of correctness. With numbers and dates, one choice is usually too small or too early, and one too large or too late; these choices may be eliminated.
- If two choices are very similar, differing only in degree, the one expressed in more general terms is probably correct.
Use the content of other questions as additional clues.

Be Wary of Multiple Answers

Carefully evaluate “all of the above” and “none of the above” choices before selecting them. For the former, all of the responses should be correct. But if you are absolutely sure that at least two of the choices are correct, then you are probably safe in choosing “all of the above.” Select the latter if you are sure at least two of the choices are incorrect.

When in Doubt, Guess

As long as you are not penalized for wrong answers, guessing is a good strategy to use. Even if you are randomly guessing, you should get about 25% of the questions correct. With educated guessing, the percentage may rise to 75%. Educated guessing involves eliminating all implausible answers first and looking for clues in the question and answers.

When randomly guessing, try some of these tips.

- The longest response is often the correct answer.
- Answer “c” is a good choice if it hasn’t been used for several previous questions.
- Some instructions use patterns in their answers, such as spelling out short words like “cab” or “bad,” to make it easier to grade the tests by hand. Looking for such patterns may help when guessing (but ignore patterns if you know the material or if the test is machine-graded).
- The answer that is longest in length may be the correct answer.

Do Change Answers

Only consider changing answers after completing the entire test. And reread the directions before checking and changing answers. First check the questions that were flagged the first time through the test. Then check the other questions if time permits. If you can’t decide between two choices, write an explanation of your choice in the margin of the test. Erase all changes carefully and completely, especially if the test will be graded by machine. Make sure all answers are legible and in the right place (circled, on blanks, on an answer sheet, etc.).

Don’t Give Up
Resist the temptation to become frustrated, bored, or anxious. Move quickly through the test. Look for material that you do know. Apply that information to questions that you don’t know. Use relaxation techniques to fend off anxiety. Use the entire class period to complete the test and check answers.

**VERBAL ANALOGY TESTS**

Verbal analogies usually are found only on standardized tests. They are objective word problems that evaluate students’ vocabulary and students’ abilities to discern relationships among words. Verbal analogies have one pair of words related in a certain way; students must pick another pair of words related in the same manner.

The following example of a verbal analogy is quoted from Kesselman-Turkel and Peterson (1981, p.50):

- bigotry: hatred
- (a) sweetness: bitterness
- (b) segregation: integration
- (c) equality: government
- (d) fanaticism: intolerance

The answer is d.

**Practice**

Old tests and study wordbooks often contain sample verbal analogies that students may answer for practice. The key is to begin preparation weeks or months before the test. Work for 30 minutes to an hour at a time. It takes considerable time to master the kind of thinking required for verbal analogy questions.

**Turn the Analogies Into Sentences**

Try putting the analogy words into sentences, such as “Bigotry relates to hatred in the same way that sweetness relates to bitterness? segregation relates to integration? equality relates to government? fanaticism relates to intolerance?” OR, “Bigotry is to hatred as sweetness is to bitterness, as segregation is to integration,…”

**Look for Clues to the Relationship**
Try to determine what the relationship is between the two words given in the question. Are they opposites? Are they related by cause and effect? The following list summarizes types of relationships found in verbal analogies.

Purpose: A is used for B the same way X is used for Y.

Cause and Effect: A has an effect on B the same way X has an effect on Y.

Part to Whole: A is part of B the same way X is part of Y.

Part to Part: A and B are both parts of something the same way X and Y are both parts of something.

− Action to Object: A is done to B the same way X is done to Y.
− Object to Action: A does something to B the same way X does something to Y.
− Word Meaning: A means about the same as B the same way X means about the same as Y.
− Opposite Word Meaning: A means about the opposite as B the same way X means the opposite as Y.
− Sequence: A comes before (after) B the same way X comes before (after) Y.
− Place: A and B are related places just as X and Y are related places.
− Magnitude: A is greater (less) than B the same way X is greater (less) than Y.
− Grammar: A and B are parts of speech related to each other – noun to noun, adjective to noun, etc. – in the same way that parts of speech X and Y are related to each other.
− Numerical: A is numerically related to B the same way X is numerically related to Y.
− Characteristic: The attributes of A and B are related in the same way as those of X and Y.

**Systematically Analyze the Words**

If the relationship isn’t obvious by looking at the first word and then the second, try switching the order. Or, look at the first word in the analogy and the first word in each of the choices. Then look for relationships between the second words in the analogy and the choices.
When in Doubt, Guess

Eliminate implausible answers before guessing. For example, if the words in the analogy are both verbs, cross off answers that contain a noun and a verb. Make guesses as long as points are not deducted for incorrect answers.