

# WRITING EFFECTIVE ESSAY QUESTIONS

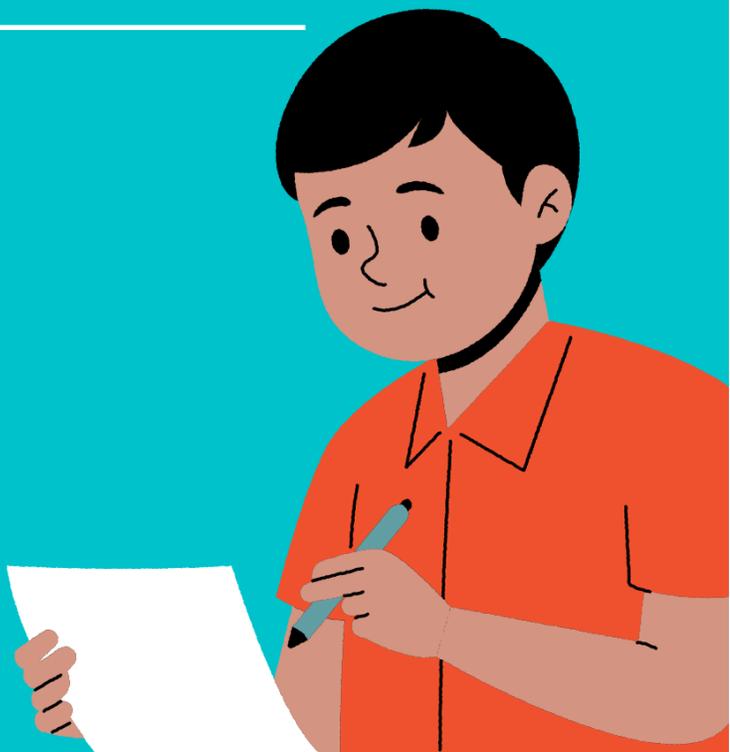
A resource for all educators

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A quick guide to constructing  
essay questions for your  
students during this  
assessment season.

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Curated by



## Writing essay questions

If we want the students to be able to deal with the complex nature of essay tests and other forms of spontaneous writing, there are some things we can do in our instruction that will prepare them more adequately.

### **Help them think differently about the material.**

Students are conditioned from an early age to think in terms of discrete facts and “correct” answers rather than looking for the relationships which are characteristic of essay answers. One of the first steps toward improved essay answers is to adopt a different perspective on the nature of what is to be learned from the material presented and read. To help students think about the material differently, the instructor can:

Encourage students to integrate material from class to class and unit to unit. For example, have the students answer some of the questions listed below each time they begin a new topic:

- How does this topic compare with/relate to what has gone before?
- How is it different? How is it similar?
- Why is it included in the course? Why at this point?
- What are its main points, its strengths, its weaknesses?
- How does it apply to the overall goal of the course?

Have them write their own sample essay questions for each lecture or reading assignment and then in class. Discuss those that most closely parallel what you would ask.

Explain the levels of cognitive complexity (such as Bloom’s taxonomy) which might be expected of them in the course and differentiate between knowledge of facts and the ability to analyse and critique material.

Emphasise the process during class time itself so that the students begin to understand how conclusions are reached rather than focusing on the conclusions alone.

### **Help them study the material differently.**

Studying for essay exams is much different from studying for objective exams. Instructors should encourage students to:

Create outlines of readings and lecture notes which emphasise the relationships among the ideas.

Paraphrase or create an executive summary for each reading or lecture. Draw concept maps, which are visual diagrams of how terms, principles, and ideas interconnect.

### **Help them write structurally sound answers.**

To help students compile the information they have learned into answers which are written more effectively and efficiently, an instructor can:

Provide a list of keywords used in essay questions and what they imply regarding answer content and structure.

Give students opportunities to practice writing essay answers in class and discussing the structure of the answers.

Assign brief out-of-class essay questions with which to practice and provide individual feedback on the writing. You may wish to develop a feedback phrase sheet, which lists your most commonly used comments and an extended description of what that comment means.

Allow the students to grade an essay answer using the system (rubric) you usually use so that they will understand how they are being evaluated.

Provide examples of good and poor answers to essay questions and explain why they are evaluated that way.

### **Help them learn time management techniques.**

Here are some examples of efficient time management techniques that the student could benefit from in completing an essay exam:

Scanning all the items and parcelling out an appropriate amount of time to spend on each according to weight or importance

Spending a few minutes outlining an answer before writing (the teacher could give some credit for the content which appears on an outline but was not included in the answer due to time constraints)

Having a checklist for quickly evaluating answers before completing the exam (such as “did you answer the question?” “are the transitions clear?” “is evidence provided for each assertion?” and so on)

## **Why should we bother?**

There is actually an additional selfish motive for improving students' essay writing skills: it makes the grading process much more manageable. If students learn how to read and interpret the structure of an essay question, they can create an answer that is comprehensive and well-organised. The task of grading those essay answers becomes less one of interpretation and more one of evaluation.

## **Before the exam**

- Check on which day and at what time you write each paper.
- Know where your exam centre is.
- Make sure that you have your student card and ID, as well as your examination timetable.
- Make sure that you have all the stationery you need, as well as a pocket calculator if needed.
- Do not study new material before you enter the hall.
- Pay attention to the exam rules and instructions.
- Be positive.

## **During the exam**

- Read the exam paper instructions carefully.
- Quickly check the exam paper to assess questions in terms of their difficulty level and point value (especially paragraph and essay-type questions exams).
- Read all the questions.
- Plan the amount of time to spend on each question. Leave time in the end to check your work.
- Start with the question you know best, but make sure that you spend enough time on the questions that count the most.

## **After the exams**

- Complete an “Exam self-assessment” sheet for each exam that you wrote.
- Make sure that you know when the closing date for the next semester/ year is and plan your studies.
- Relax.

Source: Marilla Svinicki, University of Texas at Austin The Professional & Organizational Development Network in Higher Education.

Source: Goldstein, B.E. 2005. Cognitive Psychology: Connecting mind, research and everyday experience. Wadsworth: California