

THE ART OF TAKING ESSAY TESTS

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Student Guide #2

"I hate taking essay tests. They are always so vague. I can never tell what the instructor wants. The grading is too subjective."

At one time or another, most of us have felt this way about essay tests. This study guide is intended to relieve some of the anxiety about taking essay tests and to provide some tips about how to take them. A good performance on any test begins with good preparation. This handout assumes that you have had good preparation (see Student Guide #1), and focuses on getting the most out of what you already know.

Criteria for Evaluating Essay Tests

Most instructors, either implicitly or explicitly, have certain criteria in mind when grading essay exams. Most instructors grade essays on the bases of completeness, specificity, accuracy, interpretation, and organization. Let us review each of these criteria separately.

1. Completeness. Frequently, a student will "lose the forest for the trees" by going on at great length on a minor point while entirely neglecting the major ideas. Completeness means covering all of the main points relevant to the question. Most of the time instructors have in mind three or four main ideas per question, with each idea worth X number of points. Typically, the most serious errors in essay tests are errors of omission. Besides good preparation, the best way to avoid this mistake is to "scope out" the answers before writing it (see Helpful Hint #2 page 3). Know what you are going to say ahead of time and try to be as complete as possible.

2. Specificity. In addition to complete coverage (breadth), you will also be graded on degree of specificity (depth). If instructors frequently write comments like "develop," "elaborate," "examples?" on your essays, then you probably need more depth. You can add depth to your answer by citing authors, listing facts, and giving examples. Make your main point and then back it up with evidence. An answer that is substantiated by evidence is far more convincing than one that relies totally on opinion. An answer without tills kind of detail reads like an empty bullet. Don't go into the battle without any ammunition.

3. Accuracy. An accurate answer is complete but a complete answer is not necessarily accurate. Usually, errors of accuracy are confined to single statements rather than the entire answer. For instance, you might slip up by mixing up names and facts but still be generally on the right track. Errors in accuracy are typically not as serious as errors of omission. As with errors of omission, the best prevention against errors of accuracy is good preparation.

4. Interpretation. This is the most difficult. Interpretation demands the ability to go beyond the mere description of something toward an analysis of it. Description refers to *what* the facts are; interpretation refers to *how* the facts fit together. Interpretation requires the ability to identify patterns of cause and effect. If a question asks you just to 'list' or 'describe,' then you probably don't need much interpretation. But if the question asks you to "discuss," to "criticize" or to "analyze" then you need interpretation.

Interpretation is the pathway to explanation. Although interpretation is "open-ended" in the sense that several different interpretations of the same phenomenon can be entertained at the same time, it is not an "anything goes" situation. Competing interpretations (explanations) of the same phenomenon are plausible only as long as (1) they are equally consistent with the facts (i.e. data) as they are known, and (2) they are internally consistent. By internally consistent I mean that the parts of the interpretation (explanation) are logically related to one another. So you start with observations, look for patterns, use concepts (terms) that identify these patterns, and then logically relate the concepts to one another. In essay tests you are generally not required to develop full-blown interpretive or causal schemes as in a term paper. But you are often expected to use concepts and to think in an analytical fashion.

5. Organization. Taking essay tests is a lot like playing pinball. In both cases you can go round and round and not score any points. In order to prevent this kind of rambling, you need a tightly organized essay.

Organization does not involve what you say, but how you say it. Accuracy, specificity, completeness, and interpretation can get lost in a poorly organized essay. With a well-organized essay you can get the most mileage out of what you do know.

A well-organized essay has a beginning, middle, and an end. In the beginning you set up your answer identifying the main points. In the middle you develop or elaborate your answer. In the end you summarize and draw final conclusions. Beyond this there are a number of ways to add organization to an answer.

How you choose to organize an answer depends on the question. Sometimes, the organization of the desired answer is built into the question (as in a question that has parts a, b, and c in it). In this case, you merely organize the answer according to the parts of the question. If the question is very open-ended (e.g., Discuss the evolution of the human species) and then you need to develop some scheme for ordering your ideas. In this case, for instance, you probably would want to organize your essay chronologically, according to various historical stages of evolution.

Another way to organize your answer is according to parts of a whole. For instance, on a question like "Criticize Sigmund Freud's theory of personality," you would probably want to divide your essay into three parts that correspond to the three parts of Freud's concept of the personality (i.e., id, ego, superego), criticizing each part separately and then conclude with general criticisms of the overall theory. The point is that you need *some* kind of organization to avoid rambling.

Some Other Helpful Hints

1. Read the questions carefully. Very often students will provide a perfectly good answer to the wrong question. Look for key words (e.g., compare and contrast, discuss, describe, criticize, etc.) and learn how to distinguish among them. If you are not clear on the meaning of the question, then ask the instructor to explain what s/he means. Understanding the question is obviously the first step toward providing the correct answer.

2. Scope out all of the answers before you answer any of the questions. In an answer X out of Y" question-option format, decide right away which questions you will answer. In deciding which questions to answer, keep in mind the importance of completeness, specificity, accuracy, interpretation and organization. Choose those questions that you feel you will best be able to answer. Once you know which question you will answer, then *briefly* outline answers to each. By briefly, I mean jot down the two or three or however many *main* themes or ideas you want to develop for each question. Once you have done this, then the rest of the test is merely a matter of writing out your answers. If you can scope out a test like this, then you can concentrate on scoring points on each essay rather than worrying about whether or not you know the answer to the next question.

3. Pace yourself. Like it or not, time pressures are part of the reality of being a student. In essay tests the time factor is especially important. If you don't have a watch, you should get one. In a one hour test, if you have four questions worth 25 points each, then allow yourself the equivalent of 15 minutes per question (subtracting equal time among the questions for scoping out and thinking). Obviously, give yourself more time for questions that are worth more points. You might want to spend a little extra time on difficult questions or questions that you know will require a somewhat longer response. Good organization goes a long way to overcoming time pressures. A complete answer does not have to be long if it is well organized. Well-organized answers are crisp and to the point.

4. Talk scientific talk. You should be familiar with the technical terms (concepts) used in the course and use them in your essays. If you are familiar with the technical terms, it indicates that you have kept up with the readings and paid attention in class.

Avoid slang expressions, side comments, and emotional outbursts. For instance, exclamation marks are rarely used in scientific writing! (Oops). As a group, scientists (including social scientists) tend to be a rather dull bunch--all hung up about being objective and such. Lively prose can often be effectively interjected in scientific discourse but you should know what you are getting excited about.

Examples

Any honest instructor will admit that there is some subjective judgment involved in grading essays. On the other hand, it is easy to distinguish between good essays and bad essays. Good essays are complete, detailed, accurate, analytical, and tightly organized. Bad essays are incomplete, shallow, inaccurate, and poorly organized. Purely descriptive, and poorly organized. Consider the difference between the following two essays:

Question: Describe Max Weber's three types of legitimate authority.

Answer A (example of a bad essay):

Max Weber had many ideas about how authority should be. One idea is that people who have authority should be charismatic. If people have charisma, then other people will like them. Rational authority is different. Many different kinds of people have charisma, but only some people use it. In show business as in all walks of life it is important to have charisma. Legitimate authority is that type of authority that is legitimate. Legitimate authority is the kind of authority used by armies. Criminals and those who do not have jobs use illegitimate authority. Authority should always be legitimate! Charismatic authority is legitimate but not as much. Charismatic leaders are legitimate because they support the people. Leaders should always support their people. If you don't have legitimate authority, then you will have riots and revolutions and stuff like that. Rational authority is different. Rational authority has laws. Laws are good for society. Laws tell people what to do. Max Weber was in favor of having lots of laws. Weber thought that if people had laws then social problems would go away.

There are several problems with the above essay (Answer A). First, it is incomplete. There are three types of authority but this essay only mentions two. Second, it is shallow because it lacks detail. For instance, "legitimate authority" is defined as "authority, which is legitimate." No information is conveyed by this circular definition so no credit would be given. Third, it is inaccurate on several points. For instance, the author of this essay uses a popular or vernacular meaning of the term "charisma" rather than the more precise and scientific meaning of this concept. Also, Weber did not say most of what this essay attributes to him. Fourth, this essay is descriptive and prescriptive rather than analytical or interpretive. This essay is filled with prescriptive statements of what "should be" rather than an analysis of what is. Finally, this essay is poorly organized. For instance, the sentence 'Rational authority is

different" in the first paragraph comes as an interruption in the middle of a discussion on charisma. In addition, there is no indication at this point of how rational authority might be different. The issue of rational authority is abruptly taken up again in the last paragraph.

Answer B (example of a good essay):

Max Weber distinguished three types of legitimate authority: traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational. Each type of authority rests on a claim to power and an acceptance of that claim by subordinates. All three types exclude the raw exercise of brute force or physical coercion

Traditional authority is that type of legitimate power which is based on historical precedent. Under systems of traditional authority, leaders exercise authority because custom dictates it. Those who claim traditional authority cannot exceed the bounds of jurisdiction established by custom (although various interpretations of custom allow some flexibility). Monarchies are examples of societies that have traditional authority. By custom, the heirs of a particular royal family exercise authority over individuals.

Charismatic authority, on the other hand, rests solely on the personal qualities which the leader possesses (or claims to possess). These qualities are perceived by subordinates as supernatural, superhuman, or at least beyond the reach of the ordinary person. In order to maintain charismatic authority, the charismatic leader must continually place his/her special qualities on display. Charismatic authority is particularly unstable since the special gifts of the leader cannot be transmitted to subordinates (or heirs). Jesus Christ, Adolf Hitler, and John Smith are examples of individuals who exercised charismatic authority.

Finally, legal-rational authority is authority based on rules and procedures, which are typically written down and, at least in the ideal sense, unambiguous. Subordinates owe their obedience not to an individual leader (as in the case with the other two types) but to the legal position s/he occupies. An example of rational authority is the office" of the President of the United States. The power of this office is not linked to any particular occupant, but to the constitutional provisions associated with the office.

Traditional, charismatic, and legal authority are "ideal" types. By ideal type, Weber meant an historical tendency toward a pure form of a phenomenon. In most cases, the actual exercise of authority involves "mixed-types" or combinations of traditional, charismatic, and legal authority.

The above essay (Answer B) is complete, detailed, accurate, analytical, and well organized. The first paragraph "sets up" the rest of the essay. It defines legitimate authority and identifies the three types. Each of the next three paragraphs describes in greater detail each type of authority giving a separate definition and examples of each type. The essay concludes with a statement that shows how the three types are linked together empirically.

The quality of most of the essays Instructors read falls in-between examples A and B. Using the criteria described in this handout, you will get better grades on your essay tests to the extent that your essays look more like example B than example A. Remember that good grades start with good preparation. If you have difficulty

preparing, be sure to review Student Guide #1, which deals with how to prepare for exams.

GOOD LUCK ON YOUR ESSAY TESTS!