

Top 10 Essay Test Taking Tips

Understanding some basic essay test guidelines can make all the difference in the world. Review these tips before taking exams and you could see great rewards when grades come due.



1. **Two types of essay questions: Short answer and longer, more developed answer**—Take a look at how many points are attached to the answer. If more points are given, you should anticipate a more detailed answer is expected.
2. **Read questions carefully**—Be sure you know what is being asked of you. Some directions will state specifically "in one or two paragraphs..." or "in one page...". Respond appropriately.
3. **Watch for instruction words**—Short answer questions often ask you to supply definitions, examples or other specific pieces of information.
4. **Concentrate**—on answering questions briefly and precisely.
5. **Stay on topic**—Avoid stating your opinion and making judgments unless the question asks you to do so.
6. **Restate the question in your answer**—Restating the question makes it easier for the instructor to read and follow your explanation.
7. **Don't get stuck and waste time**—If you don't know an answer, move on and come back to it later. Other questions may jog your memory.
8. **Don't leave anything blank**—Often you can get at least partial credit by answering part of the question.
9. **Some questions will require longer answers**—It is important to answer in detail but don't ramble. Stick to the facts and information. Develop the answer in logical format and state answers in clear, grammatically correct response.
10. **Guidelines for longer essay questions**—
 - a. **Read each questions carefully**—Watch for instruction words (see back this handout for *instruction words*). Make sure you understand what the questions is asking you to do. If you do not know, seek clarification from the instructor.
 - b. **Think about what you will write**—Plan the answer and allow time to write thoughtfully.
 - c. **Scratch out an outline**—It is easier to make sure you don't forget anything this way.
 - d. **Incorporate question into answer**—See # 6 above.
 - e. **Develop points that explain your response**— showing detail shows instructor that response is thoughtfully developed.
 - f. **Save time at end to proofread and correct errors**—Should be self-explanatory.

What the mind of man can conceive and believe, the mind of man can achieve. -- Napoleon Hill

Top 14 Instruction Words in Essay Tests

Instruction words are guidelines from your instructor that guide you in the correct way to answer questions. Know what they mean will make the difference between an "A" and a "D".

Instruction Words	Meanings
Compare	Explain similarities and differences
Contrast	Explain differences only
Criticize or evaluate	Make a judgment about strengths and weaknesses, worth or merit, positive or negative aspects.
Define	Give a precise and accurate meaning
Describe	Give a mental impression, a detailed account
Discuss or explain	Give reasons, facts and details that show you understand
Enumerate or list	State points one by one and briefly explain
Illustrate	Explain by using examples
Interpret	Explain in your own words and discuss significance.
Justify or prove	Construct an argument for or against and support with evidence
Outline	Describe in general and cover main points
Summarize	Condense main ideas; state briefly
Trace	Describe a series of steps, stages or events