

GRADING STRATEGIES

Using Essay Exams in Your Class

How you phrase your exam questions can influence your students' performances on essay exams. An effectively written exam question and appropriate exam conditions give your students an opportunity to succeed; a poorly written exam question or vague conditions can cause you to suffer hours of drudgery reading through poor answers. Of course, the way you word your exam questions or the form of the exam will not prevent you from receiving poor performances from your students. However, if you consider the goals of your course, the conditions of the exam, and a few ideas about writing, you and your students may have a better experience with essay exams.

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Goals of Your Course

When designing an essay exam, first review your course goals. What is it that you want your students to learn and to do in your course? You may have several separate goals or several sequential goals in your course. Choose which goals you want to try and meet with an essay exam and which goals you might reach with other assignments. An essay exam is a limited tool, but it is a useful one if it is important for students in your course to analyze, synthesize, and organize under pressure. Your students may respond to this testing scenario better if you explain to them why you think experiencing the time limits and pressure of an essay exam will help them learn the material in your course. Explain why you have chosen an essay exam instead of another testing or learning opportunity.

When you review the goals of your course, pay attention to the verbs you use. If you say, "It is important for students in my course to synthesize the information in their readings," or "students in my course need to be able to compare and contrast two processes in order to understand this subject," then you need to write essay

questions that encourage those skills. Designing your essay questions around a verb may help you describe clearly the mental activity in which you expect your students to engage. See the attached list of verbs commonly used in essay exams.

In choosing the verb around which you focus your essay exam question, consider how descriptive or prescriptive you want to be in your directions to the student. In general, a descriptive assignment gives the student a good degree of freedom and responsibility for developing the shape and content of an answer. A more prescriptive assignment gives a student step by step instructions on the depth and order of an answer.

Types of Essay Exam Questions

Open-ended Questions:

If it is important for your students to learn to develop opinions or to make choices, you may want to give them questions that allow them to make decisions in formulating their answers. For example, your exam question may be simply,

"Discuss feminism" or "Discuss Capitalism and its implications for the Third World."

Answering these questions successfully requires that a writer make a series of choices about a topic, focus, examples, and organization. To successfully answer, a student will have to navigate these decisions and chart a path through the broad field of feminism or Capitalism. Many students, however, will not automatically make cohesive choices, instead, opting for the "write everything I know" strategy or the "give the teacher what she wants" game. To prevent such wandering answers, you may want to add a guiding statement that explicitly states that you want them to make choices in developing an answer. For example, you may add to your initial assignment,

"We have covered many different aspects of this topic so far in the quarter. In answering this question, it is up to you to choose which aspect, angle, or material so that your answer reads as a coherent statement about one aspect of feminism."

With this statement, students realize that your vague directions were intentional and not designed to trick them. They will then feel freer to express their ideas, and give up trying to guess what your ideas are. This question preserves your goal of teaching students to make choices and also explicitly encourages them to do so. Be forewarned. If you follow your general direction with a series of questions to prompt their thinking, for example,

"Discuss Capitalism and its implications for the Third World. Is there such a thing as the Third World? Where is it? What economic, political, and social structures govern its existence? What is the future of the Third World?"

rest assured that some students will try to answer all of your questions and won't be making choices about the topic or organization of their answer. If you want to get their thinking started, you may have more success if you include an additional statement. For example, you could add,

"Consider these questions and the questions you have developed in our course. Pick what you see as the most important question and answer it."

If you want your students to include specific information in their answers, it is better to write a directed question as described later in this handout.

Context Questions:

If you want to give your students further guidance than an open ended question provides, consider creating a context for your exam question. Write a scenario that posits a purpose and audience. For example, if you want your students to identify factors that contributed to the French Revolution, you might write,

"You are one of Robespierre's henchmen. You are ordered to quell a riot caused by a food shortage by persuading the masses that the new order is an improvement over the old regime. Write a speech to be read to the people. You will be guillotined if you fail in your attempt. "

or

"You are a French peasant in 1788 who is starving. Write a petition to the king in which you describe how you landed in your present situation and ask for appropriate reforms."

Most students readily adapt to these constructed contexts. The contexts provide a frame in which they can develop their answers, and they stimulate the kind of writing, need based writing, that they will encounter in their futures. Context questions have the advantage of shifting the writer's focus away from you as the grading audience toward the posited audience, and thus, the course material.

Directed Questions:

In some courses, especially those that introduce new material or use technical or sequential material, you may want to prescribe how students structure their answers. Such prescriptions usually provide topic and organization for the writers and allow them to worry about accurately presenting information. For example, if you want your students to define and explain successive steps in a scientific process, you may want to write,

"In two pages, define photosynthesis in words and in a formulaic expression. Explain why it is important to the growth of a plant. Next, describe the specific chemical reactions that take place within an instance of photosynthesis. Your answer should be complete and accurate."

This kind of exam question allows students to concentrate on appropriately expressing specific details.

Structuring Conditions for the Essay Exam

There are several ways to schedule essay exam questions. Again, the way you structure the exam relates to the goals of your course. Why have you chosen to give students an essay exam? What do you want to examine about the students' knowledge? Consider the different conditions created by an in class essay exam, a take home essay exam, a collaborative in class or take home exam. For an essay exam, you may choose to

give students the essay questions in advance or use the surprise element and give the questions at the time of the exam.

Each examination condition creates performance parameters for the student. Recognize that you are examining their test taking skills as well as the material in your course. In most cases, students are learning how to take the test as they take it. Some students have developed successful test taking strategies—ways of budgeting their time, tactics for organizing information quickly—others have not. But in most cases each of your exams is a new, and very particular, testing situation for them. The more you can tell your students about how they might approach your exam and how you will evaluate it, the more successful they will be writing it.

In Class Essay Exams:

In class exams are exercises in coping with pressure and time limits. An in class essay exam is an appropriate tool when it is important that students restate a large amount of information in a short time or synthesize or apply relatively straightforward material. If your exam question or in class instructions do not indicate the purpose of the exam, in confusion, the students will resort to prior and general experience. They will "write everything they know" and leave you with a "mind dump" or they will try to prove that they have "done the reading" by spouting a list of random facts. Their primary concern may be to "make it sound good" or to write "academically." The results will leave you with a lot of vacuous prose to read. If you choose to give students an in class exam, explain why you are using this testing method and suggest ways in which they might prepare for and approach the testing situation.

Take Home Essay Exams:

Take home essay exams are essentially papers for which you have supplied the topic. They vary in length according to how long you give students to complete the exam. A short preparation period requires a short paper (usually 2-6 pages), a longer preparation time allows for longer, more developed papers (7-12 pages). Careful wording of the exam question will necessitate careful preparation of answers by the students. Acknowledge that students will probably discuss the exam questions outside of class and encourage students

to draft and turn in a polished response. Remind them that you are purposely giving them time to mull over the exam question and produce a thoughtful answer.

Collaborative Essay Exams:

You may want to structure an exam that requires students to work together to write an answer. This kind of assignment works especially well to challenge and test students' problem solving strategies or when synthesis or comparison is vital. Any group of students will have assorted views on any subject, and they will naturally become engaged in these acts in the process of developing their answers. Collaborative exams can be structured as in class or take home assignments. For more information on [Collaboration Assignments](#) see the resource link on this topic.

Evaluating Essay Exams

When you design the assignment and structure exam conditions, you automatically give yourself a set criteria and standards with which you can evaluate the exam. Open ended questions often produce exploratory answers; Context questions generate imaginative, persuasive, or critical answers; Prescriptive questions draw factual answers. You evaluate the exams according to how well the students answered the questions. The exam questions will also dictate your response. If the students were writing in class, the limitations of time and pressure may cause rough expression of ideas. If students were given time outside of class to complete the exam, you can expect a more polished text. If students work together to produce an answer, coherence of ideas will be a factor. You evaluate the exams according to how well students coped with the conditions. Before you evaluate any exam, take a moment to imagine how you would answer the exam question and why you would answer it that way. Check to see if your answer reflects the question you asked and not other assumptions you may not have made explicit in the questions.

Responses Students Can Learn From:

Of course, both you and the students are interested in the grade of an exam. However, the comments that accompany the grade you assign, no matter how brief, will determine whether the exam will be a learning experience with your course material or another in a long line of lessons about teachers and subjectivity. In commenting

on an essay exam you may choose to comment on or need to make comment in three possible areas—testing, course-related concerns, writing issues. If you would like further information on responding to writing, see [Responding & Evaluating](#).

Meanwhile, a few kinds of responding procedures may be particular to essay exams.

Testing Issues:

Include your criteria for evaluation on the exam question. If the intent of the exam is not clear to the students, it will be when they read your evaluation guidelines. Try to be specific and explicit. Instead of grading papers according to "clear expression and coverage of material," you may want to explain, "I will evaluate your exam according to how easily it reads, how many examples you provide, and how well the examples support or illustrate the points you want to make. I hope that reading your exam is a pleasant, straightforward experience for me. If I have to work as a reader to understand your ideas, organization or sentences, then I am going to wish that the writer had worked harder to make them clear to me."

Acknowledge the testing conditions in your comments. Remarks like, "Given the weekend time constraint..." or "Your writing during this hour indicates..." show that you are evaluating students' work within a defined context. You are not judging their souls or predetermining their future performances. Provide an opportunity for students to give you feedback on the exam and exam conditions in writing soon after the exam.

Course Related Concerns:

Students need feedback on how they are coping with the material of the course. To comment on this issue, you may want to return to the goals of the course or the verb you used in your essay question. If a student shows particular skill when synthesizing material, they need to hear it as well. Without direct comments about the general mental activity exhibited in the exam, students will interpret your remarks as text specific and not about the course material or what you expect them to do with the course material.

Be aware that some students might not understand exactly what you mean by synthesize or analyze. While these terms are common school instructions and mental maneuvers you take for granted, they may be vague, general, or mysterious terms to some students. Some students may never have been taught that when you analyze, you examine something in terms of the relationship between parts and wholes. Even if they think they do know how to analyze, they may not be sure what that means in your discipline or if you mean the same thing that their last instructor meant. When students don't know what you are asking them to do or if they aren't sure they can do it well, they will usually do something else. Summarize instead of synthesize for example, because they are more sure of how to summarize and they have had success with summaries before.

Related issues:

- When a student hasn't exhibited the effort or depth required by the level of your course, let them know.
- During class and in your feedback on the exam, make practicing a specific mental activity a desired goal by acknowledging it.
- Ask students to give themselves grades or to trade exams with their peers and then give themselves grades. This self-evaluation gives students a chance to assess their own progress with the material.

Writing Issues:

Using essay exams does not necessitate that you respond to your students' answers as a grammarian. Respond instead as you naturally do in the act of reading. Ask questions and make brief statements in the margin. Comments like "What's the topic? I'm lost. I like this idea. What do you mean? What's the connection? How does this relate to X? I follow. Clever example" indicate to the writer that you are engaged with their ideas, much more forcefully than AWK, sub/v agr, CS, frag.

When a student's grammar, mechanics, usage, punctuation, or style gets in the way of your understanding, you can let them know in one of several ways. Put a check mark in the margin when you are tripped up by something in the writing. This method is preferable to correcting, rewriting, or circling errors. You don't find the errors, the

student does. Indicating where the student's writing interferes with communication gives the student the opportunity to locate, question and learn from their mistakes. They may need assistance in learning to understand and cope with their errors. You can invite students to come to you for assistance and direct them to the Writing Center.

If you feel you need to address a student's writing performance, focus on one dominant flaw in their text--organization, use of commas, or word choice for example. Writing is a developed skill and most people progress in their development if they attempt to solve one problem at a time. If you hand back an exam with one central comment the students are more likely to read it than if you handed them back an exam covered in ink. Unfortunately, early on most schooling teaches students that many marks on a piece of writing mean failure of some kind. So, even when your words are praise, some students may not read them if your words blot out their own words.

Ask students why they wrote their exam, sentence, paragraph as they did. Most writers have reasons for their choices, both the good choices and the bad choices. Learning the source of the students' misunderstanding can be the most efficient road to clarification.

Be prepared to refer students to sources of information where they can get help with their writing. Consider adding an optional writing handbook to your course text requirement (use one you are familiar with so that you can teach a student how to use it if asked). Print information about the Writing Center in your course syllabus. Introduce your students to your discipline's style manual when appropriate.