

# Essay Exam Strategies

## Steps for writing an essay exam:

1. Outline the main ideas you want to share in answering the question.
2. In the opening paragraph, write a direct answer to the question in one or two sentences. If you can answer the question briefly, the rest will be easier.
3. Begin a new paragraph for each point. Support your points by giving specific names, dates, and examples. Try ending with a summarizing sentence or paragraph that ties up your paper.
4. Make your answer clear. Assume that the reader is ignorant of your topic.
5. Proofread your answers. It is better to turn in a paper with corrections than one with errors. A paper with errors says you do not care what you turn in.
6. Write something for every essay question you are asked to answer, even if you are not certain that what you are saying is correct.

## Key Terms

**Identification terms:** These direct you to present the bare facts, such as a name, phrase, or date.

**Description terms:** These ask you to tell about a specific topic in some detail.

Examples: describe, review, discuss, summarize, develop, outline, trace, diagram, illustrate, sketch.

Sample question: “Discuss the importance of *sentimentality* in the novel *Great Expectations*”: here your topic is clearly outlined for you. You must know what *sentimentality* means. How it is used and what is important about it is up to you to determine.

**Relation terms:** These direct you to describe the similarities, differences, or associations between two or more subjects.

Examples: contrast, compare, differentiate, distinguish, analyze, relate.

Compare or contrast means do one or the other; you cannot do both. Compare and contrast means do both.

**Demonstration terms:** These tell you to show why something is true or not.

Examples: demonstrate, explain why, justify, prove, show, support.

**Evaluation terms:** These ask for your opinion or judgment about something.

Examples: criticize, assess, comment, evaluate, interpret, propose.

**\*\*Remember, your professor’s instructions supersede any of these suggestions. ALWAYS do what your professor instructs on an exam (i.e. writing style, length, topic, source citing, etc.)!**