

**HOW TO TAKE ESSAY TESTS:
A KEY TO SUCCESSFUL PERFORMANCE**

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Look for relationships between main topics.

When studying in preparation for an essay test, pay attention to the main ideas, concepts, principles, and supporting points. Look for relationships between the various chapters, headings, sections, and topics.

Consider similarities and differences.

Effective learning often involves *similarities* and *differences*. When studying, look for *comparisons* and *contrasts* among the ideas.

Consider abstraction and particularization.

Effective learning involves abstracting and particularizing ideas. When studying, look for ways to conceptualize ideas out of concrete examples (*abstraction*) and look for ways to give concrete examples of abstract ideas (*particularization*).

Consider analysis and synthesis.

Effective learning also involves analyzing and synthesizing ideas. When studying, look for ways to break down ideas into their smaller component parts (*analysis*) and for ways that ideas can be built into larger concepts (*synthesis*).

Use an outline when studying.

An outline helps to organize material, and an outline becomes increasingly important as the material becomes more complex. When studying, make as complete an outline as possible. Jot down key words, phrases, and quotes.

Read essay test directions twice.

When taking an exam, read the directions twice. Unless there are many questions that require only a few words for an answer, read through all the questions. As with any activity, warm up and prime your memory to begin working.

Underline key words in instructions.

Before taking the test, underline key words that require a task. Underline key words like *name*, *describe*, *compare*, and *discuss*. Keep these key words in mind when answering the question.

Remember the key words in instructions.

When asked to *name*, *list*, or *outline*, the task is to simply jot down a number of items that are connected with the subject, not necessarily to explain anything. When asked to *compare*, take the two items named and show their similarities and differences. When asked to *define*, *describe*, or *explain* something, present the topic from several points of view. Think of the unusual points about the subject that other students might miss.

Think before you write.

A good rule is to “think more and write less.” When beginning an answer, start by making a summary statement, and then elaborating on it. Don’t let your pen lead your thoughts. Stay calm and composed when writing your answers. When you become aware of a new idea, write it down.

Think of the general and the specific.

When you answer a question, write a brief outline first. List all facts you can think of first. When writing your final answer, just flesh out the outline with these facts as you go. When your answer ties in with another one you’ve given, be sure to mention this link because it may give your answer more credibility.

Be concise when you write.

A hallmark of good writing, *economy of expression* refers to the ability to express an idea using a minimal number of words. Good writing is concise rather than wordy.

Write in short sentences. Excessive wordiness can also result in long sentences, which require more complex grammar and punctuation. Two short sentences are usually better than one long sentence.

Avoid informal colloquial expressions. When writing in a professional style, avoid the use of slang, vernacular, and colloquial expressions. For example, use the formal word *report* rather than the informal term *write up*. Avoid vague expressions that diffuse meaning. For example, use the specific word that conveys your meaning (e.g., symptom, problem, topic, or volume of a journal) rather than a nonspecific term (e.g., issues, things).

Use key terms contained in the reading. Avoid the use of jargon, but use key words contained in the assigned reading that is being tested. When using technical terms, be sure that you show that you understand its meaning.

Follow your outline on discussion questions. When asked to *discuss* a topic (the most difficult type of direction), follow your outline carefully. Take a separate sheet of paper and use numbers or letters to divide your answer into sections. When possible, give *examples* and *illustrations* to support your discussion.

Provide support for your answer. One of the important elements in a discussion question is credibility. Demonstrate your knowledge by providing *citations* of authors, articles, or research. Direct quotes of authors often make a point concisely. Although not always required, a *references* section at the end of your essay may increase the creditability of your essay.

Prioritize your work on timed tests. If it's a timed test, keep a sharp eye on your watch. Budget your time based on the credit given for the question. First answer the questions you are sure of and leave some space between answers for facts and ideas that may come to mind later.

Use legible writing. No matter what type of exam you face, remember to write legibly. This tip is especially true for essay questions. To some degree, your score depends on your examiner's subjective evaluation of your answers.

Show style as well as content. Good writing is characterized by good style as well as good content. Use correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation. If you are required to use a certain writing style (e.g., APA, MLA), then use it. Regardless of style, always use correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

Proof your final answer. Last but not least, always proof-read your essay paper before handing it in.

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Modern Language Association

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