

Essay Exams

Exam essay questions are designed to enable students to show their understanding of the concepts in a subject. Understanding involves not only being able to remember facts and ideas but also being able to explain the connections between them, often through the use of examples.

Understanding of a subject takes time to develop. It makes sense for you to be building your knowledge and understanding of a subject by reading, revising and taking notes throughout the semester rather than cramming everything at the end. Our brains need time to process, to 'incubate' our understanding.

Preparation for the exam

Here are some study tips to make your study *much easier* when it comes to exam time.

Attend

Turn up to classes, particularly the first and last lectures when it is most likely that the lecturer will talk about what will be on the exam.

Actively participate – do the readings before class, listen, take notes, ask questions about the things you don't understand.

Talk about the subject with other people in the unit. Create or join a study group and share notes, ask each other questions, explain concepts to each other.

Read

Keep up with your readings each week. If you can't get through all the weekly readings at least make sure you do some. Don't wait until the end of semester to read.

Don't just read but also take notes of the main points. If you have a textbook start by reading the summary of the chapter set for the week and complete any revision questions. You will be surprised how often these questions are used in exams.

Rewrite

After attending classes and reading the assigned material each week, you need to rewrite the ideas in your own words. Use text, diagrams or concept maps to make the ideas memorable.

A suggestion for rewriting is set out in the table below.

Main idea/Topic/Theme/	An explanation in your own words	Example of how, when, where, why can/do I apply this?	Notes on connections to any other concepts

Chunk

When the time comes for you to revise for your exams you need to summarise all the information you have collected over the semester.

Memory works best when it has bite-sized pieces of information to track, like memorising a phone number in sets of 3 digits. 'Chunking' means to reduce large amounts of information into smaller components (see *Figure 1*). These chunks provide summary information to help you link back to more complex ideas.

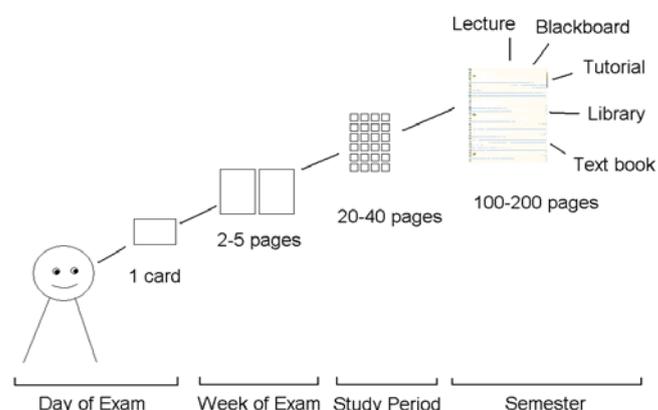


Figure 1

Memorise

If you have followed the previous tips you will not need to spend hours memorising a vast amount of study material. Test yourself each time you chunk your notes to make sure you can move easily from the summary to the details you need. On the day of the exam, you should be able to move from a single concept map of the course to all of the materials required for the exam.

Structuring an exam essay

As you get closer to exams, it is useful to start writing practise essays. Sample essay questions are often provided by lecturers and tutors – so check your Blackboard site. You may also find copies of exams questions from previous years on the library home page (under past exams). The Discussion Questions' at the end of chapters in a text book are also often useful as practise essay topics.

If no questions are provided, write your own questions and answer them. Questions will most likely be based on the main topics in your unit rather than minor details.

Set out below are common types of questions that can be asked in an exam.

Explanatory Essay

In an essay of this type you are asked to explain various aspects of a topic (eg. parts of a system, causes of a development, effects of an action). The usual structure is in a list. Look at the example in *Figure 2* which develops a list of reasons for the development of archaeology.

Explanation	Method to prepare an answer
<p>Question: <i>Why was the early 19th century so important for the development of archaeology?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Find 3-5 reasons to answer the question, e.g. why was 1800-1850 important for the development of archaeology. E.g.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Richard Colt Hoare's use of meticulous site measurement ○ Augustus Pitt Rivers' museum design ○ Flinders Petrie's systematic methodology ➤ <i>Write 1 section for each reason (1-2 paragraphs).</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Outline each reason in the first sentence of the paragraph. Indicate to your reader the order in which it comes (eg. secondly, finally) or the relationship of this point to the information in the previous paragraph (eg. Likewise, similarly, however, on the other hand).</i> ○ <i>In the following sentences show evidence to justify that reason,</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ e.g. discuss the impact of River's museum design on current museum curatorship. ○ <i>Finally, explain why that reason is significant to the essay question,</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ e.g. explain why museum design is significant to the development of archaeology. ➤ <i>Write a conclusion that summarizes the sections and answers the question.</i> ➤ <i>Write an introduction that introduces the question and summarizes how the essay answers the question.</i>

Figure 2 Preparing an explanatory essay

Interpretive Essay

In an essay such as this you are often given some form of data (eg. scenario, graph, table, picture) and you are asked to apply the knowledge you have gained in the unit to interpret the information given. You need to write about both the knowledge you have and the way it applies to this information. Look at the example in *Figure 3* which uses the knowledge of Erikson's theory of human development to explain the behaviour of Jemma in the scenario given.

Interpretation	Method to prepare an answer
<p>Scenario: 'Jemma (aged 14 years) fights a lot with her parents but not with her friends. She used to be a keen student but now seems to have lost interest in both her school studies (she wants to leave school next year) and outside school activities. She does however take a passionate interest in the environment and in boys.'</p> <p><i>Interpret these behaviours in the light of Erikson's stage theory on adolescence.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Learn the theory, e.g. Erikson defined adolescence as a period when children:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Develop a sense of identity ○ Act in the world ○ Show devotion to friends ○ Develop a passion for causes. ○ <i>Write up a table that links the details of the case study to the aspects of the theory</i> ○ Look at each of the behaviours in the case and relate to the relevant part of the theory (from your readings and lecture notes) that explain that behaviour. ➤ <i>Write a paragraph on each component of the theory using aspects of the case-study to illustrate each idea-see Figure 3.</i> ➤ <i>Write a conclusion that summarizes the sections and offers an overall interpretation of the case-study.</i> ➤ <i>Write an introduction that introduces the theory, outlines the structure of the essay and summarizes the overall interpretation of the case-study.</i>

Figure 3 Preparing an interpretive Essay

Argumentative Essay

This is another common form of essay question in exams. It asks you to take a position on a topic giving reasons for your views. You should also address any arguments that oppose your position. Note the example in *Figure 4* which outlines the reasons for and against a statement about nursing's role in the prevention of the spread of disease.

Argumentation	Method to prepare an answer
<p><i>Nursing practise has been crucial in preventing the spread of disease. Do you agree?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Find 2-3 reasons both for and against the proposal that nursing practise has been crucial in preventing the spread of disease.</i> <i>Example</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ FOR Improved sanitation of patients ○ FOR Systematic observation of symptoms ○ AGAINST Use of disinfectant in surgery ○ AGAINST Disease is transmitted between individuals outside of hospitals and areas that nurses work in. ➤ <i>Decide on a thesis statement that sums up your evaluation of the question</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ e.g. Nursing practise through the use of improved sanitation and the systematic observation of symptoms has been crucial in preventing the spread of disease in hospitals. ➤ <i>Write 1 section for each reason (1-2 paragraphs).</i> ➤ <i>Show evidence to justify each reason,</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ e.g. discuss the impact of improved sanitation on disease transmission. ➤ <i>Write an introduction that states the question and summarizes how the essay answers the question</i> ➤ <i>Write a conclusion that summarizes the sections and answers the question.</i>

Figure 4 Preparing an Argumentative Essay

