



Studying for examinations

Writing essay examinations

Essay exams are designed to test your ability to synthesise information and to organise your thoughts in writing.

TIPS FOR ESSAY STYLE EXAMINATIONS

- Be familiar with the terminology used in essay exam questions.
- See the PDF: Examination Instruction Words. Make sure you know exactly what is being asked of you. Terms like ‘compare’, ‘trace’, ‘illustrate’ and ‘evaluate’ all have different meanings and will require a different interpretation of the question.
- Take time to read the exam paper thoroughly.
- Make sure you read each question carefully and are sure you understand what it is asking. A common mistake made in essay exams is not understanding exactly what the question wants you to answer. Spend the first 5 minutes reading the paper thoroughly.
- If the question is ambiguous, unclear or too broad, make clear your interpretation before answering. You would normally indicate this in the introduction of your essay.
- Before writing, jot down all your ideas and organise them into an essay outline. You can do this on the exam paper itself, or on any spare paper you have with you. Don’t write your essay off the top of your head, as it is likely to end up disorganised and incoherent. Also, if you have jotted down ideas and keywords and you have a mental blank during the exam, you will be able to refer to these and keep writing quickly.
- Always indicate the question number of the essay. You don’t have to answer them in the order in which they appear in the exam paper. Start with the easiest one first and do the hardest last. This approach reduces anxiety and can facilitate clear thinking. However, if you do write your answers out of sequence, make sure you indicate clearly which question you are answering.
- Make sure you time yourself on each question. A common mistake made in essay exams is running out of time. If you time yourself, this can be avoided.

WRITING THE ESSAY STYLE ANSWER

Always give your answer in the first sentence. A good technique is to use the wording of the question in your answer.

For example:

How do the goals of liberal and socialist feminism differ?

You could begin your essay with:

The goals of liberal and socialist feminism differ in three main ways ...

This approach makes sure you answer the question, and it also makes the exam easier to mark.

Make sure you structure your essay in three parts: Introduction, Body, Conclusion. The function of these sections is as follows.

An Introduction explicitly states your answer and the organisation of the essay. For example:

ACADEMIC LITERACY

The goals of liberal and socialist feminism differ in three main ways. The first is that..., The second is... and the third main area of difference lies in the.... This essay will argue that although these differences exist in approaches, the practices of liberal and socialist feminism have become very similar.

The Body of your essay should include supporting material with names, dates and appropriate details to your answer. Make sure you structure the body of the essay as you indicated in your introduction. Use transitions (for example, Next ..., Another reason) to tie your ideas together. This will make your essay flow.

In your Conclusion, re-answer the question and refer briefly to your main points in the body. Show HOW you have answered the question. For example:

In conclusion, it is clear that although liberal and socialist feminists originally held differing views on how to attain their goals, a realistic assessment now shows that their practice has become very similar. This is most clearly illustrated by...(give your best example and end the essay).

Leave some space between sections in case you have time to add any information you didn't include in your first pass. If you run out of time, answer in point form. Markers will often give you some marks for this. However, only do this if you run out of time.

Try to write as legibly as possible. If you have very messy handwriting, try printing or writing on every second line.

If you have time at the end of the exam, proof read your essay for grammatical mistakes and spelling errors.

