

Essay Test Taking Strategies



In addition to applying general test-taking tips, essay test takers must also learn and apply strategies for taking essay tests. These basic but essential strategies will help test takers perform well on essay tests.

- **Read the question carefully and make sure you understand what the question asks.** Your first task is to find out *precisely* what the question is asking. *Watch for instruction words* (see “Key Words on Essay Tests” handout). Know the meanings of instruction words and underline each one. For example, if you are asked to *compare* the Clinton and Bush administrations, no matter how eloquently you *describe* them, you have not successfully responded unless you make direct comparisons.
- **Make a quick outline before you write.** There are three reasons for doing this: 1) You will probably be able to write your answer faster because the outline will guide you and help to organize your answer; 2) You are less likely to leave out relevant and important information; and 3) If you don’t have time to finish writing your essay response, the outline might earn you some points.
- **Concentrate on answering the question precisely.** One way to provide a precise answer is to *begin by including part of the question in your response*. For example, the question might be “Discuss how the Clinton administration affected low income single parents.” Your first sentence might be “The Clinton administration affected low income single parents in three major ways. *Start off with the most solid and strongest points*. This will help convince your audience you know what you are talking about. *Avoid filler sentences that say nothing*. Instructors don’t like to “work extra hard” to find your answers. Stay on the topic; avoid stating your opinion or making judgments unless the question asks you to do so.
- **Write as though you are explaining something to a person who is uninformed about it.** When you write in this manner, you are more likely to include relevant information you might otherwise omit. In addition, the information will probably be easier for your teacher to read and understand.
- **Use an erasable ballpoint pen unless you are instructed to use pencil or another type of pen.** Sometimes instructors find that pencil writing is difficult to read. You can easily correct errors when you use an erasable pen.
- **Indent each paragraph and leave a margin on all four sides of the paper.** If possible, leave space in between your answers in case you need to add them later. Also unless instructed to write on both sides of the paper or unless you just need the writing space, write on one side of the paper only. If you write on both sides, writing will probably show through on each side and become messy.
- **Summarize your main ideas in a short, concluding paragraph.**
- **Proofread your answers if you have time.** Check the grammar, organization, spelling errors, clarity, and legibility. Check to make sure you have answered the question.
- **When responding to a question that requires a long essay answer, a common format to use is the three or five-paragraph essay.**
- **Neatness does count.** Make sure to erase mistakes and make your paper as neat and easy-to-read as possible.