Essay Exams

Avoiding Writer's Block: Outline!

You can prepare thoroughly for an essay exam at home by following a few simple guidelines. First, predict the questions you expect on the test at home. Simply use the essay test direction words listed below to turn chapter titles and subtitles into questions. (You can use this same guideline to form questions from the main ideas in your lecture notes.) Then after studying the material write an answer to the question(s). You will want to review this answer several times and reduce it to an outline in your head that you can use when you arrive at the exam room. If your teacher gives you a study guide to prepare for the exam, use the same technique. Review your lecture and/or text notes and then write an answer to each question on the study guide. Learn your answer by reducing it to an outline that you can remember and use during the exam.

Let's look at each of these steps individually.

1. PREDICTING AN ESSAY QUESTION

To predict a question, look at the key words in the chapter title and subtitles and think about their relationships. Next try to apply the information to an actual or hypothetical situation.

For example, let's look at a chapter that contains the following title and subtitles:

BODY TEMPERATURE AND ITS REGULATION

Normal Body Temperature

Heat Gain

Heat Loss

Processes by which Heat is Lost

Avenues of Heat Loss

What is it you think your professor will want you to know about the regulation of body temperature in the chapter title and subtitles listed above? As you think about this, remember that it's not enough just to *define* the terms such as heat loss or be able to list avenues of heat loss, but you must also be able to **apply** how these processes work in different climatic conditions etc.

A question you might predict would be:

Explain what you understand by normal body temperature. Then contrast the processes by which the body uses chemical thermoregulation to gain heat versus physical thermoregulation to lose heat. Finally, analyze the environmental factors that must be present in order for a human to maintain normal body temperature.

2. WRITING THE ANSWER

First, brainstorm an answer. Jot down key words in outline form that will organize your answer to the question. An example outline might be:

1) Range of normalcy
2) Chemical thermo - basal metabolism
3) Physical thermo – radiation, conduction, convection
   (examples: humid conditions, outside temperature, clothing)

Then write a **short** introductory paragraph that **answers** the question and in the body of your essay. As you write this sentence(s), try to structure and transition your essay so that it is easy to read and follow. A paragraph should consist of 4-5 sentences. It should NOT be either one sentence or a whole page.

"For example, I will explain that normal body temperature is actually a range. Then I will illustrate how basal metabolism in chemical thermoregulation serves to increase body temperature. I will contrast that to heat loss in which physical thermoregulation affects the processes of radiation, conduction and convection. Finally, I will discuss some climactic factors that must be present for a human to maintain normal body temperature."

Note that the introductory paragraph above responds to the direction words in each of the three parts of the example question above—explain, contrast and analyze. Also the writer did not just repeat key words like normal body temperature but indicated what his answer will be. For example, "there is not one body temperature, but a range".

Secondly, write a separate paragraph to expand and support each of the ideas in the body of your essay. In this example essay, for instance, there might be three more paragraphs to form the body of the essay.

One paragraph would explain what a normal body temperature is and how it may change. The next paragraph would note the differences between the processes in physical and chemical thermoregulation. The last paragraph might give examples of outside temperatures, apparel or other factors that would affect a human's ability to survive.

Finally, as you write your answer remember to:

- Use language that is clear and direct
- Not pad your answer with a lot of extraneous information
- Follow the outline you jotted down
- Use technical terms and vocabulary used in lecture or in your textbook (**In fact, make it a point to know these words so that you can use them correctly and knowledgeably because these terms will be meaningful to your professor. **)
- Use as many examples and facts as possible to support your thesis
- Do not give your opinion unless it is asked for by the essay question direction word such as justify, prove etc.

ESSAY QUESTION DIRECTION WORDS

The following explanations of essay question direction words can help you both to predict good essay questions at home and to thoroughly understand and correctly answer essay questions in the exam room. They have been categorized according to their level of difficulty. For the first group, it is often enough to simply memorize and correctly explain a term. For the second group, you must be able to see the relationships between the ideas and terms. In the third group, you are being asked to apply the information in a new situation or critically analyze a situation giving your own opinion. The more deeply you study and prepare at home using all three levels of questions; the better prepared you will be for an essay exam.

I. The Definition level:

Describe	Means to write a detailed account or verbal picture in a logical sequence or story form.
Discuss	Means to describe giving the details and explaining the pros and cons of it.
State	Means to describe the main points in precise terms. Be formal. Use brief, clear sentences. Omit details and examples.
Define/Explain	Means to give the formal meaning by distinguishing it from related terms. This is often a definition to be memorized.
List/Enumerate	Means to produce a numbered list of words, sentences or comments.
Trace	Means to follow the progress or history of the subject

2. The Interpretive level:

Compare	Means to show both the similarities and differences.
Contrast	Means to compare by showing the differences.
Diagram	Means to make a graph, chart, or drawing. Be sure to label and add brief explanation if necessary.
Illustrate	Means to explain or make it clear by concrete examples, comparisons or analogies.

3. Application and Evaluation level:

Review	Means to give a survey or summary in which you look at the important parts and criticize where needed.
Prove	Means to show by argument or logic that it is true. The word prove has a special meaning in mathematics and physics.
Interpret	Means to give the meaning using examples and personal comments to make the ideas clear.
Evaluate	Means to give your opinion or some expert's opinion of the truth or importance of the concept. Tell the advantages and disadvantages.
Justify	Means to give a statement of why you think it is so. Give reasons for your statement or conclusion.