

Class Essay Exams

APSU Writing Center Handout

In-class essay exams are timed writing assessments completed during class in response to a specific prompt. These test your ability to think critically, organize ideas quickly, and write clearly under pressure.

How to Prepare Before the Exam

Attend class regularly and take organized, detailed notes.

Review your notes and look for patterns, themes, and connections.

Identify the type of essay you may be asked to write (compare/contrast, argumentative, analytical, etc.).

Practice by brainstorming possible prompts based on course topics.

Review previous feedback to understand your instructor's expectations.

Make sure to take some time to rest to avoid burning out.

What to Do During the Exam

Take a breath and remind yourself that preparation matters more than speed.

Read the prompt carefully and underline or note key terms.

Narrow your focus and develop a clear thesis before writing.

Briefly plan your essay so ideas flow logically.

Use topic sentences and transitions to guide the reader.

Save time at the end to review and revise.

Time Management Examples

75-minute exam

15 minutes: planning and outlining

50 minutes: writing

10 minutes: reviewing and editing

45-minute exam

10 minutes: Reading and Evaluating the prompt

5 minutes: Introduction

15 minutes: Body Paragraph 1

15 minutes: Body Paragraph 2

5 minutes: Conclusion

Common Exam Keywords (What Professors Mean)

Analyze: Break a topic into parts and explain how they work together.

Compare: Discuss similarities and differences and explain their significance.

Define: Explain what something is, what it is not, and how it differs from related ideas.

Discuss / Examine: Explore relationships, evaluate ideas, or interpret meaning.

Evaluate / Assess: Make a judgment supported by evidence, considering multiple viewpoints.

Explain: Describe how and why something works or happens.

Illustrate: Use specific examples to clarify or support an idea.

Interpret: Explain the meaning of a text, event, or idea.

Outline / Trace / Review: Organize and describe key stages or elements.

Prove: Present a clear claim and support it with logical reasoning and evidence.

Planning: Read the prompt, identify key terms, and draft a clear thesis with 2–3 supporting points.

Introduction: Provide brief context and state a focused thesis that directly answers the prompt.

Paragraph 1: Present your strongest point, support it with evidence, and explain how it proves the thesis.

Paragraph 2: Present a second main point with evidence and analysis that continues to support the thesis.

Body Paragraph 3: Develop a third supporting point if time allows.

Conclusion: Restate the thesis in a new way and briefly explain why your argument is significant.

References

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