

TAKING ESSAY TESTS

Use test time well. Quickly survey the entire test and note the questions that are easiest for you. To build confidence and start the recall process, answer these questions first, but be careful. Knowing certain material very well may tempt you to write brilliantly for 30 minutes on a question worth only 10 points, leaving little time for a harder question worth 30 points. Avoid this costly error by knowing ahead of time the basic examine structure, the point allotments, and the types of questions. Then govern yourself during the test according to a plan for choosing questions and allocating the right amount of time for each. Also be sure to wear a watch to the test. If you forget to do so, ask the instructor to periodically call out or write the time or the time remaining on the board.

Write focused, organized answers. Many well-prepared students write fine answers to questions that have not been asked. This problem stems either from not reading a question carefully or from hastily writing down everything you know on a topic in the hope that somehow the question will be answered. Instructors agree that these kinds of answers are frustrating to read because of their lack of focus and organization. A simple seven-point strategy will help you stay focused and organized:

- Read the entire question carefully.
- Take the time to read it again and underline the key words. This forces you to read the question accurately. The underlined words will stimulate recall of relevant information.
- Brainstorm. Write down all the ideas you can think of in response to what the question asks. Then read over your notes, underline the most important points, and use them in your answer. If you do this extra writing on the test paper, be sure to cross it out if you do not want it counted for credit.
- Use the underlined words in the question and in your written brainstorming to construct a brief outline. This ensures good organization.
- Begin your answer by rewriting the question or problem. This reinforces your focus.
- Write the rest of the answer according to your outline. For each major idea try to write at least one paragraph and give at least one supporting example. If new ideas come to mind as you write, add them at the end.
- Make sure each answer begins with an introduction and ends with a conclusion.

Here is a sample question from a psychology test:

Modern educational psychology has discovered a great deal about how students learn, and this has led to the development of several powerful study techniques. Identify three such techniques and explain how and why they work.

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| • Brief statement of topic or question and the approach: | Introduction |
| • A simple direct restatement begins the answer with a focus on how: | Modern educational psychology has a lot to offer the student who wants to learn how to study more efficiently. |
| • The answer will build on two key concepts--efficiency and the problem of forgetting: | Define efficiency.
Describe forgetting as the problem. |
| • The techniques are first listed without numbers, in the order remembered. Then the techniques are numbered in the order that seems most logical for presenting them in the written answer. The first three techniques will appear in the body of the answer. The last two will be mentioned in a concluding paragraph, just to show that there are more than three. | 4 Advance organizers (conclusion)
3 Recitation
1 Recall columns
2 Super recall columns
5 Multiple-choice strategies (conclusion) |
| • Brief summary--final thoughts and perspectives: | Conclusion |