Essay Exam Survival Tips

From the Academic Advising Office, Grinnell College

Most professors at Grinnell prefer to use essay or short-answer exams to other types. If you are used to taking only multiple-choice exams, the adjustment to writing essay exams may be challenging. These tips can help you to adequately prepare for an essay exam.

- **Brainstorm possible questions** that may be asked before you even enter the exam session. You will have time to organize what you might write about and in what order.

- **Read the instructions carefully.** Look for what the question is asking. Underline “buzz words” such as compare, describe, discuss, contrast, (see list below) before attempting to answer the question.

- Find out how many questions you have to answer and **budget your time** accordingly. Begin with the questions you feel the most knowledgeable about. Do not spend more than your budgeted amount of time on any one question.

- **Read over all questions** before beginning to write, especially if you have a choice in what you answer.

- Take time at the beginning to **outline or plan** what you would like to say before you begin writing. Reason out answers before you begin writing.

- Make your main point or a **thesis statement in the opening paragraph** of your essay. It will clarify for the reader what you are trying to say and you will be able to branch out into specific examples in following paragraphs.

- **Use transitional words** such as thus, however, therefore. Your thoughts will flow much more smoothly.

- Discuss events in **chronological order** if there is a time sequence. The reader can follow your thoughts more easily.

- **Be precise,** but cover as much as possible. Be selective about what you know and what you choose to write to support your points. You will not have time to put down everything you know, so try to choose the events that best support what you want to say.

- Pull your points together in the concluding paragraph and **restate in different words your main idea** or your thesis statement. Bring the reader back to the point you originally made and give a feeling of finality to your paper.

- **Proofread** your answers at the end of the exam.

- **Attempt to answer all questions.** Partial credit is better than no credit at all.

Adapted from “Writing Essays for Exams” from the Purdue Online Writing lab, available at [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/737/1](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/737/1)