Exam Taking
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Revised Fall 2005 for CLASS and ECLP

OVERVIEW of EXAM TAKING

This handout contains the following components:
- Guidelines for Writing Essay Exams
- Understanding Direction Words
- Exam Study Schedule and Checklist
- Sample Thesis Statements
- Responding to Essay Exam Instructions

This handout will help you with the following tasks:
- Reading Essay Exam Instructions
- Scheduling Study Time for Major Exams
- Responding to Instructions and Key Words on Essay Exams
- Formulating Essay Exam Answers

I. SOME GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR WRITING ESSAY EXAMS

1. Read the directions carefully.
2. Preview the exam and plan your time accordingly.
3. Note the point values of each question.
4. Choose topics or questions carefully.
5. Answer the easiest question first.
6. Consider your audience and purpose.
7. Remember that your first draft may well be your final draft.
8. Plan and organize your answer.
9. Be sure to write in complete and grammatically correct sentences.
10. Write a brief introduction that states your thesis (main idea).
11. Write a separate paragraph for each of your key points; each paragraph should contain a topic sentence and supporting detail.
12. Supply sufficient evidence to support your points.
13. Write a brief conclusion that re-states your thesis.
14. Do not be afraid to cross out words or sentences neatly and to indicate corrections in spelling and grammar.
15. Be sure to leave enough time to re-read and proofread your essay.

II. UNDERSTANDING DIRECTION WORDS

**Discuss**: Write as much as you can; work out the implications of the topic.
Sample Essay Question: Discuss the concept of “the imperial presidency.”

**Describe**: Write as much as you can using visual and tactile detail.

**Explain**: Discuss reasons/define concept.
Sample Essay Question: Explain Dialectical Materialism.

**Compare**: Discuss similarities.
Sample Essay Question: Compare democracy and republicanism.

**Contrast**: Discuss differences
Sample Essay Question: Contrast Freud’s and Jung’s theories of human personality.

**Justify**: Give reasons or provide a reasonable defense of your judgment that something is beneficial or effective.
Sample Essay Question: Justify California’s policy of expenditure on higher education.
III. EXAM STUDY SCHEDULE AND CHECKLIST

Before the Week of the Exam:

- Get information from the professor.
- Re-check time, date, and location of exam.
- Consider joining a study group consisting of diligent and disciplined students like yourself.

Five or Seven Days before the Exam:

- Read through all notes from classroom lectures and reading assignments
- Create three master lists (key terms, general terms, and important events and people)
- Take four to six hours per subject to prepare lists

Two to Five Days before the Exam:

- Work extensively and repeatedly with the master lists
- Quiz yourself on each master list for each subject every day.
- Take notes on general themes and brainstorm about possible essay questions.
- See your professor to ask last minute questions if you have them.
- Meet with study groups or partners, should you choose to do so.
- Read other sources besides textbook and lecture notes if time allows.

The Night before the Exam:

- Give yourself one final read-through of the master lists.
- Make a cram sheet of terms that still are difficult for you.
- Relax; see a movie or watch TV.
- Get together materials to bring to the exam: pens that work, bluebooks, watch, snack, drink.
- Get a good night’s sleep.
- Set your alarm before going to sleep.

The Day of the Exam:

- Think about some key terms and general themes for a mental warm-up.
- Eat a meal high in carbohydrates.
- If you have an afternoon or evening exam, use the morning for a final read-through of your master lists.
- Make certain you bring writing utensils and a watch to the exam.
- Get to the exam room early to choose a good seat.

IV. Sample Instructions: Essay Exams.

1. Sample Topic: Define attention deficit disorder and compare and contrast it with one other learning disability.
   Key Term: Define, Compare and contrast
   Strategies for Answers: Specify meaning of ADD—distinctive characteristics; compare and contrast it to other learning disorders
   Example of wrong answer: Describing feelings of children with ADD.

2. Sample Topic: Analyze the role of Horatio in Hamlet.
   Key term: Analyze
   Strategies for Answers: Break down Horatio’s role into its elements
   Example of Wrong Answer: Plot summary of Hamlet.
3. **Sample Topic:** Trace the three most important causes of the French Revolution  
   **Key Term:** Explain or trace cause and effect  
   **Strategies for Answers:** Analyze the causes of historical change  
   **Example of Wong Answer:** Narration of events.

4. **Sample Topic:** Explain Thorstein Veblen’s Theory of Conspicuous Consumption.  
   **Key Term:** Explain  
   **Strategies for Answers:** Break down theory into its constituent parts.  
   **Example of Wrong Answer:** scattered statements about Veblen’s beliefs.

5. **Sample Topic:** Discuss the mental testing controversy, summarize the arguments and research that support both sides of the controversy, and list the implications of the controversy for educational policy.  
   **Key Terms:** Discuss, summarize, list  
   **Strategies for Answers:** Describe conflicting views, summarize each side’s argument, list probable or possible results or consequences  
   **Example of Wrong Answer:** Analysis of one view or argument.

V. Sample Thesis Statements for Essay Questions

1. **Topic:** Compare and contrast the settings of Fitzgerald’s “Babylon Revisited” and Faulkner’s “A Rose for Miss Emily.”  
   **Thesis:** Fitzgerald’s “Babylon Revisited” is set in Paris during the Great Depression, while Faulkner’s “A Rose for Miss Emily” takes place in the South during the 1920’s; however, both stories weave back and forward in time through retrospection and flashback.

2. **Topic:** Explain Thorstein Veblen’s theory of conspicuous consumption.  
   **Thesis:** The theory of conspicuous consumption postulates that the upper classes flaunt their status by displaying luxury commodities and engaging in leisure activities.

3. **Topic:** Define and illustrate the term “freedom of the press.”  
   **Thesis:** Freedom of the press was established by the First Amendment and guarantees that the press will not be censored from depicting factual events or expressing opinions.