

## Tips for Preparing for an In-Class Essay (Adapted from Nicole Sackley)

### BEFORE THE EXAM

1. Read each essay question carefully. What is being asked of you? What are the one or two “must-have” course concepts that you need to be able to answer this question?
2. Re-read the assigned readings and lecture notes with an eye to gathering evidence and interpretations to use in your own argument. Think about how you’ll focus your thesis statement to pull together course concepts in an original way.

3. Write your thesis statement:

What a thesis statement is...

- A distillation—in one or two sentences—of the argument you will be making in your essay to follow.
- Your point of view on the question(s) on the table and your reasons for that point of view, based on your interpretation of the evidence.

What a thesis statement is not...

- A restatement of the exam question or quotation.
- A statement that one agrees, disagrees, or agrees partially with a particular quotation. You must also explain what interpretation of evidence leads you to that particular conclusion.
- A thesis statement is NOT a statement that simply provides a general description without making any specific points. For example, “something changed dramatically” or “something was greatly affected.” You must specify “how it changed” or “in what ways it was affected.”

4. Prepare an outline of your major points and evidence in advance.

Outlining before the exam has three big advantages. First, you become clear in your own mind of what you are arguing before you go into the exam. Second, you insure that you have specific examples prepared to back up your assertions. Third, during the exam, you have a guide in your head that keeps you from wandering off topic. From my experience with essay exams in college, I found that the outlines which worked best were detailed enough to remind me of what I wanted to say, but not so detailed that I couldn’t take a minute to scribble them on my exam before I began writing.

### DURING THE EXAM

1. Write down your outline before you begin your essay.

This is certainly not required but has two advantages. First, as mentioned above, it prods you to stay “on point.” Second, if you do run out of time, it offers your instructor a window into where you were headed in your answer. This can allow them possibly to give you some credit.

2. Write clearly, yet concisely.

Essay exams are not the place for extended introductions, flowery turns of phrase, or sentence fillers like “as was noted earlier in this essay,” “in a way,” or “this was a piece of legislation that...” You only have 60 minutes to make your case. Don’t waste valuable time on words that don’t add anything. I call this the “cut out the fat” rule.

3. Exploit acronyms.

Think of this as the corollary to the “cut out the fat” rule. Make use of well-known acronyms to save time in writing: as in, “strat comm,” TV, U.S. etc.

4. Write legibly, but quickly.

While your handwriting must be able to be read, you do want to write fast enough to get down all your points. Legibility, not neatness, is what counts.

5. Examples follow the argument.

Don’t write inductive paragraphs in which you provide an extended example and then, at the end, explain why the example was significant. Instead, write deductively. Make your general point first and then follow it up with concise yet specific pieces of evidence from the lecturers or the readings.

6. Provide a “roadmap” of topic sentences.

Every major new point you make should be signaled with a new paragraph that begins with a topic sentence summarizing what your point is.

7. Use numeric lists and qualitative cues to make your argument clear.

A numeric list is...

A red flag to your readers to look for two, three or four reasons, examples, or points in the upcoming paragraph. For example, “FDR’s personal presence was important to the reception of his policies in three ways. First, it.... Second, he.... And finally, ....”

Qualitative cues are...

Cues to the reader that you are drawing similarities and contrasts in your argument; you are privileging one explanation over another, or you are positing a causal relationship between two events. Examples of qualitative cues include: “One the one hand...on the other,” “the most important reason...,” “As a result,” “Although,” “In contrast,” “because,” “Since,” etc.