

CHAPTER 8

WRITING ESSAY EXAMS ABOUT LITERATURE

Taking exams is a skill that you have been developing throughout your life as a student. Both short-answer and essay exams require you to study, to recall what you know, and to budget your time carefully as you write your answers. Only essay questions, however, ask you to synthesize information and to arrange ideas in a series of clear, logically connected sentences and paragraphs. For this reason, taking essay exams requires writing skills. To write an essay exam — or even a paragraph-length answer — you must do more than memorize facts; you must identify the relationships among them. In other words, you must think critically about your subject, and you must plan, shape, draft, and revise an essay that clearly communicates your ideas to your audience.

Planning an Essay Exam Answer

Because you are under pressure during an exam and tend to write quickly, you may be tempted to skip the planning and revision stages of the writing process. But if you write in a frenzy and hand in your exam without a second glance, you are likely to produce a disorganized or even incoherent answer. With careful planning and editing, you can write an essay that demonstrates your understanding of the material.

Review Your Material

Be sure you know beforehand the scope and format of the exam. How much of your textbook and class notes will the exam cover — the entire semester's work or only the material covered since the last test? Will you have to answer every question, or will you be able to choose among alternatives? Will the exam test your ability to recall specific facts, or will it require you to demonstrate your understanding of the course material by drawing original conclusions?

Exams challenge you to recall and express in writing what you already know — what you have read, what you have heard in class, what you have reviewed in your notes. Before you even begin an exam, you must study: reread your textbook and class notes, highlight key points, and perhaps outline particularly important sections of your notes. When you prepare for a short-answer exam, you may memorize facts without analyzing their relationship to one another or their

relationship to a body of knowledge as a whole: the definition of romanticism, the date of Queen Victoria's death, two examples of irony, four characteristics of a villanelle. When you prepare for an essay exam, however, you must do more than remember bits of information; you must also make connections among ideas.

When you are sure you know what to expect, try to anticipate the essay questions your instructor might ask. Try out likely questions on classmates, and see whether you can do some collaborative brainstorming to outline answers to possible questions. If you have time, you might even practice answering one or two in writing.

Consider Your Audience and Purpose

The audience for any exam is the instructor who prepared it. As you read the questions, think about what your instructor has emphasized in class. Although you may certainly arrange material in a new way or use it to make an original point, keep in mind that your purpose is to demonstrate that you understand the material, not to make clever remarks or introduce irrelevant information. In addition, you should make every effort to use the vocabulary of the discipline for which you are writing and to follow the specific **conventions** for writing about literature (p. 00).

Read Through the Entire Exam

Your time is usually limited when you take an exam, so plan carefully. How long should a “one-paragraph” or “essay-length” answer be? How much time should you devote to answering each question? The exam question itself may specify the time allotted for each answer, so look for that information. More often, the point value of each question or the number of questions on the exam indicates how much time to spend on each answer. If an essay question is worth 50 out of 100 points, for example, you will probably have to spend at least half of your time planning, writing, and revising your answer.

Before you begin to write, read the entire exam carefully to determine your priorities and your strategy. First, be sure that your copy of the test is complete and that you understand exactly what each question requires. If you need clarification, ask your instructor or proctor for help. Then, decide where to start. If there is more than one question on the exam, responding first to the one you feel most confident about is usually a good strategy. This approach ensures that you will not become bogged down responding to a question that baffles you and be left with too little time to write a strong answer to a question that you understand well.

Read Each Question Carefully

To write an effective answer, you need to understand the question. As you read any essay question, you may find it helpful to underline key words and important terms: Summarize in detail the contributions of American writers of the Harlem Renaissance, briefly outlining the contributions of artists and musicians.

Look carefully at the question's wording. If the question calls for a comparison and contrast of two works of literature, a description or analysis of *one* work, no matter how comprehensive, will not be acceptable. If a question asks for causes *and* effects, a discussion of causes alone will be insufficient.

Key Words in Exam Questions		
Explain	Clarify	Classify
Compare	Relate	Identify
Contrast	Justify	Illustrate
Trace	Analyze	Define
Evaluate	Interpret	Support
Discuss	Describe	Summarize

As its key words indicate, the following question calls for a very specific kind of response. The first response to it simply *identifies* three characteristics of *one* kind of detective story and is therefore not acceptable.

Question

Identify three differences between the hard-boiled detective story and the classical detective story.

Unacceptable Answer

The hard-boiled detective story, popularized in Black Mask magazine in the 1930s and 1940s, is very different from the classical detective stories of Edgar Allan Poe or Agatha Christie. The hard-boiled stories feature a down-on-his-luck detective who is constantly tempted and betrayed. His world is dark and chaotic, and the crimes he tries to solve are not out-of-the-ordinary occurrences; they are the norm. These stories have no happy endings; even when the crime is solved, the world is still corrupt.

The next answer, which *contrasts* the two kinds of detective stories, is acceptable.

Acceptable Answer

The hard-boiled detective story differs from the classical detective story in its characters, its setting, and its plot. The classical detective is usually well educated and well off; he is aloof from the other characters

and therefore can remain in total control of the situation. The hard-boiled detective, on the other hand, is typically a decent but down-on-his-luck man who is drawn into the chaos around him, constantly tempted and betrayed. In the orderly world of the classical detective, the crime is a temporary disruption. In the hard-boiled detective's dark and chaotic world, the crimes he tries to solve are the norm. In the classical detective story, order is restored at the end. Hard-boiled stories have no happy endings; even when the crime is solved, the world is still a dangerous and corrupt place.

Brainstorm to Find Ideas

Once you understand the question, you need to find something to say. Begin by **brainstorming**—a quick listing of all the relevant ideas you can remember about a topic. Then, identify the most important points on your list, and delete the others. A quick review of the exam question and your supporting ideas should lead you toward a workable thesis for your essay answer.

Shaping an Essay Exam Answer

State Your Thesis

Often, you can rephrase the exam question as a **thesis statement**. For example, the question “Discuss in detail the contributions of American writers of the Harlem Renaissance, briefly outlining the contributions of artists and musicians” suggests the following thesis statement.

Effective Thesis Statement

Writers of the Harlem Renaissance—notably Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks, Zora Neale Hurston, and Langston Hughes—made significant contributions to American literature; artists and musicians of the movement also left an important legacy.

An effective thesis statement addresses all aspects of the question but highlights only relevant concerns. The following thesis statements are not effective.

Vague Thesis Statement

The Harlem Renaissance produced many important writers, artists, and musicians.

Incomplete Thesis Statement

The writers of the Harlem Renaissance, such as Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks, Zora Neale Hurston, and Langston Hughes, made significant contributions to American literature.

Irrelevant Thesis Statement

The writers of the Harlem Renaissance had a greater impact on American literature than the writers of the Beat generation, such as Jack Kerouac.

Make a Scratch Outline

Because time is limited, you should plan your answer before you write it. Therefore, once you have decided on a suitable thesis, you should make a **scratch outline** that lists the points you will use to support your thesis.

On the inside cover of your exam book, arrange your supporting points in the order in which you plan to discuss them. Once you have completed your outline, check it against the exam question to make certain it covers everything the question calls for — and *only* what the question calls for.

A scratch outline for an answer to the question “Discuss in detail the contributions of American writers of the Harlem Renaissance, briefly outlining the contributions of artists and musicians” might look like this:

Thesis statement: Writers of the Harlem Renaissance—notably Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks, Zora Neale Hurston, and Langston Hughes—made significant contributions to American literature; artists and musicians of the movement also left an important legacy.

Writers

Wright—Uncle Tom’s Children, Black Boy, Native Son
 Brooks—poetry (classical forms; social issues)
 Hurston—Their Eyes Were Watching God, essays,
 autobiography
 Hughes—poetry (ballads, blues); “Simple” stories

Artists and Musicians

Henry Tanner
 Duke Ellington

Drafting and Revising an Essay Exam Answer

Referring to your outline, you can now begin to draft your answer. Don’t bother crafting an elaborate or unusual **introduction**; your time is precious, and so is your reader’s. A simple statement of your thesis that summarizes your answer is your best introductory strategy. This approach is efficient, and it reminds you to address the question directly.

To develop the **body** of the essay, follow your outline point by point, using specifically worded topic sentences to introduce your supporting points and clear transitions to indicate your progression from point to point (and to help your instructor see that you are answering the question in full). Such signals, along with parallel sentence structure and repeated key words, will make your essay easy to follow.

The most effective **conclusion** for an essay exam is a clear, simple restatement of the thesis or a summary of the essay's main points.

Essay answers should be complete and detailed, but they should not contain irrelevant material. Every unnecessary fact or opinion increases your chance of error, so don't repeat yourself or volunteer unrequested information, and don't express your own feelings or opinions unless such information is specifically called for. In addition, be sure to support all your general statements with specific examples.

Leave enough time to reread and revise what you have written. When you reread, try to view your answer from a fresh perspective. Is your thesis statement clearly worded? Does your essay support your thesis and answer the question? Are your facts correct, and are your ideas presented in a logical order? Review your topic sentences and transitions. Check sentence structure and word choice, spelling and punctuation. If a sentence — or even a whole paragraph — seems irrelevant, cross it out. If you suddenly remember something you want to add, you can insert a few additional words with a caret (^). Neatly insert a longer addition at the end of your answer, box it, and label it so your instructor will know where it belongs. Finally, be sure that you have written legibly and that you have not inadvertently left out any words.

Sample Student Essay Exam Answer

The essay exam answer on pages 0000–00 was written in response to the following question.

Question

Fictional characters (like real people) do not always behave as others wish or expect them to. Sometimes they rebel against these expectations and act quite differently. In a clearly written and supported essay, explain how the specific actions of any three characters in works we have read this semester defy the expectations of those around them. Then, briefly consider the consequences of each character's decision to rebel.

As you read the following response to the question, notice that the student writer does not include any irrelevant information. She does not, for example, provide unnecessary plot summary or discuss more than three characters; she covers only what the question asks for. Guided by the question's key words —*explain* and *briefly consider*— she describes how each character's actions are defiant and outlines the consequences of those actions.

Introduction rephrases exam question and introduces four characters to be discussed	<p>Many characters we have read about this semester do not behave as others believe they should behave. This is apparent in the actions of Connie in Joyce Carol Oates's short story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" Nora in Henrik Ibsen's play <u>A Doll House</u>, and Marty in Paddy Chayefsky's play <u>Marty</u>. For each of these characters, rebellion comes with a significant sacrifice.</p>
Thesis statement	<p>Connie's rebellion is somewhat typical for a teenager: she rebels against the constraints her parents put on her to be a "good girl" by being a "bad girl" (at least in their terms). The makeup and style of clothing that Connie wears when she is away from home reinforce this "bad girl" image. Her behavior—staying out late, lying about where she is going, having "trashy daydreams"—creates a problem for her parents because she is not conforming to their standards and because she is not conducting herself in a manner they consider appropriate. Her actions also put a strain on the relationship between her and her sister, who is the perfect example of a "good girl." Her determination to rebel ultimately makes her stay home from the family outing, and this in turn leaves her alone and vulnerable to Arnold's advances. Thus, her rebellious actions lead to probable violence (she goes with Arnold, who we know has frightening plans for her). The ending of the story is ambiguous. We do not know if she ever comes back; possibly, her innocent rebellion leads to her death.</p>
First character's actions explained	<p>Nora in <u>A Doll House</u> rebels only after she understands the conflict between the duty to herself</p>
Consequences of actions	
Second character's actions explained	

to be a "real" person and the duty to her husband and children. Throughout the play, we see this conflict escalating until Nora has no choice but to act to resolve it, choosing to go against the norms of society and against how others think she should act. This behavior creates a problem for Torvald because of the image it presents to others. Torvald's greatest fear is that society will not accept him, and when Nora admits what she has done, he panics. At the end of the play, Nora chooses to be true to herself even though the person closest to her does not approve—and even though she will lose her children. She will be a stronger person because she has found the courage to stand up for herself.

Consequences
of actions

Marty's rebellious act is simply his decision to call Clara even though his friends and his mother do not approve. Although Marty is an adult, he is very much still an adolescent in some ways. He has not yet broken away from his mother, and he continues to seek approval from her (and from his friends). He struggles to please his mother—by going to the dance, by allowing Aunt Catherine to move in—even when her desires are in conflict with his own. Marty's action at the play's end—calling Clara—will create a problem for his mother and his friends, who fear his growing independence and fight his decision to pursue a relationship with Clara. But Marty, like Nora, chooses to be true to himself and to do what he thinks is the right thing for him, rather than what others force upon him. He risks hurting his mother, alienating his friends, and losing the only life he

Third character's
actions explained

Consequences
of actions

knows. But for Marty, the potential gains seem worth the risk.

Conclusion

Connie, Nora, and Marty all break with society; all struggle to be independent. For all three, this independence has a cost. Connie may lose her life, Nora gives up her marriage and her children, and Marty leaves behind the comforting, secure existence he has known. Although each character deals with conflict and rebellion in a different way, all three struggle within themselves when decisions they must make are in conflict with the norms and expectations of society. For all three, rebellion leads to sacrifice.