

# Tips for Essay Questions on Exams

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## A. Writing the Exam

1. **Set up a time schedule.** If six questions are to be answered in sixty minutes, allow yourself seven minutes each (assuming questions are equally weighted). When the time is up, move to the next question. There will be 15 to 18 minutes left when the last question is completed. Use the remaining time to finish incomplete answers. Six incomplete answers, by the way, usually receive more credit than three complete ones and three unanswered ones.
2. **Read through questions once.** Answers will come to mind immediately for some questions. Write down key words, listings, etc. when they are fresh in your mind so that these ideas will not be blocked or unavailable later in the exam time. This strategy will reduce anxiety and will remind you how much you know.
3. **Be sure you understand the question.** Before you write your answer, be sure you understand what is being asked. Is it clear? If not, ask for clarification. Underline key wording of the question “name three” or “compare and contrast” to be sure you’re answering the question completely.
4. **Outline the answer before writing.** If your answer is well organized, compact, complete and clear, your instructor will be impressed!
5. **Include an introduction and conclusion.** The introduction may be a rewording of the question into a statement containing your main point. A compact conclusion, highlighting the main points and tying the main ideas into a neat bundle, should follow the body of the answer. Both the introduction and the conclusion should be concise.
6. **Reread the paper before turning it in.** When we rush, we tend to
  - a. misspell words
  - b. omit words and parts of sentences
  - c. omit parts of questions
  - d. miswrite dates and figures (1353 as 1953; \$.50 as \$50, etc.)
7. **Qualify answers when in doubt.** It is better to say “Toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century” than to say “In 1984” when you are uncertain of the exact date. Often the approximate time is all that is necessary and will save you from an incorrect entry.

## B. After the exam

Go over the exam. Take note of what you did right. Also note what you missed and why. Reviewing the exam can save you hours of worry before the next test because you are making yourself consciously aware of your weaknesses and at the same time reassuring yourself about your strengths. If you don’t understand what you have done, *talk to your professor—it’s the fastest way to become effective in a class.*