Exams: answering

an essay question

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Exams: Writing an Essay

The most common reasons why students get poor marks in an exam are:

* Not answering the question
* Not referring to course material
* Not allocating time efficiently

Therefore, you must:

* Use your time effectively
* Deconstruct questions carefully
* Identify the points you want to make and provide evidence to support them
* Plan the essay structure

In the exam

In a typical three-hour exam, you may be required to answer three or four essay questions.

* Try to allocate your time equally planning out what you are going to write first.
* You may spend ten minutes planning and forty-five minutes writing.
* Do not spend too long deciding which question to answer

Select Questions Carefully

Step 1

Read through all of the questions carefully.

* Tick (√) the ones you feel most confident about answering.
* Circle (O) the ones you could try and put an X besides the questions you think you would not be able to answer.

Step 2

Try noting down some ideas on those you have placed a tick by.

Step 3

Then identify the directive or task words in the question, e.g. explain, describe, discuss or outline and use a highlighter or circle to make these words stand out.

Then highlight or underline the content words (what the essay is about). This helps to organise your thinking on both what the essay is about and how you are being asked to address the question.

In the space below write out an exam question. Use past papers from Blackboard or examples in your module handbook. Highlight the key content and task words.

Sample Exam Question

Identify the points you want to make and provide evidence to support them.

Step 4

Quickly list the key points/ ideas/ issues / theories the question may cover:

1.

2.

3.

4.

Step 5

Check whether the points selected answer the question – do they relate to the content words?

Is there anything you can exclude, rephrase or add?

Add evidence to support each point:

1.

2.

3.

4.

Step 6

Check the order of ideas, you may need to rearrange them and re-read the question.

Writing the essay

Introduction

* Refer to the content words of the question, but do not simply repeat the question.
* Introduce and explain the importance of topic
* Discuss your approach to the question (e.g. the theories you will drawing on and why).
* Outline the main points that you intend to cover in the main body

Main body

* Write about each point and support with theories and examples.
* If the question asks for a discussion – give different views supported by evidence.

Conclusion

* Return to the main theme of the question raised in the introduction.
* Summarise/draw together the main points/issues discussed.
* Make a final evaluative statement about how the essay has addressed the question.
* For more help with any aspects of exams refer to: <https://www.gcu.ac.uk/student/essentials/exams/>

Further reading:

Tracy, E. (2002) The Student’s Guide to Exam, London: Open University Press.

Cottrell, S. (1999) The Study Skills Handbook, London: Macmillan Press Ltd