

PREPARING FOR AN ESSAY/SHORT ANSWER EXAMINATION IN HISTORY

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Essay and short answer exams are open-ended. That is, you are free to put in or leave out whatever you wish. This fact can work in students' favor if they know the course material well, but if they don't it can leave them floundering.

Generally, *there are six ways you can lose credit on an exam with an essay or short answer component.* The key to doing well on essay and short answer questions is to avoid these by doing all of the following:

- 1) follow the exam instructions;
- 2) write your answers legibly;
- 3) include in your answer *everything* that is *reasonably related* to the question I have asked;
- 4) leave out of your answer information that is *unrelated* to the question I have asked;
- 5) make sure that the facts you put in are accurate/correct; and
- 6) make sure that the material you have included in your answer is organized properly.

Below I discuss each of these elements in greater detail.

1) Follow the exam instructions. When you get your exam, take a minute or two to read the instructions carefully. A major mistake that some students make, for instance, is to answer more questions or fewer questions than the instructions direct them to answer. The instructions on my exams usually state (emphatically) that you are to answer one of the two essay questions, and four of the six identification questions. My typical instructions also expressly note that in the event a student answers more than the required number, I grade only the number of questions for which I asked you to answer, in the order in which I come to them. Thus, answering both essay questions, or five or more short answer questions, is literally a waste of your time. There's no way it can help you, and it takes your time away from answering the questions I will grade. *Thus, the first way to lose credit on an exam is to fail to follow the instructions.*

2) Write your answers legibly. You are under time pressure when writing an exam, and I understand that. On an exam I'm not grading you on spelling, grammar, or neatness. Your handwriting doesn't have to be perfect, your spelling doesn't have to be completely accurate, and you're allowed to cross out things. But if, after making reasonable efforts to do so, I am unable to decipher your handwriting, or your grammar becomes so bad that I can't figure out what or whom you're talking about, or your statements are so vague or ambiguous that I cannot ascertain

what exactly you mean, I will be unable to give you credit for what you have written. *Thus, the second way to lose credit on an exam is to write illegibly.*

3) Include in your answer everything that is reasonably related to the question I have asked. In history and government courses, students must deal with at least two types of information—two types of thinking—to varying degrees on essay and short answer exams. The first type, which is fact-based, is fairly objective. For example: Article I, Section 8 of the United States Constitution gives Congress the power to regulate interstate commerce. General Burgoyne surrendered his army to the Americans at Saratoga in 1777. Thomas Jefferson and James Madison wrote the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions in 1798. A German U-boat sank the *Lusitania* in May 1915. Franklin D. Roosevelt won the presidential election of 1932.

The second type can be based less on fact and more on things such as inference, or an understanding of cause and effect, or a grasp of how one event, fact, or set of facts resembles or relates to another event, fact, or set of facts. This type of information, while more subjective, is arguably much more important than the bare facts themselves. Here are some examples of questions of this sort: Why has the Supreme Court’s understanding of the interstate commerce power changed over time? What caused the French government to recognize the United States in 1778? Did the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions suggest that a state could secede from the Union? Was Woodrow Wilson’s response to the sinking of the *Lusitania* the correct one? Did Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal policies ultimately strengthen or weaken American society?

With either type of question, there can be a difference between how well you know the material you’re being tested on and what you write about that material on the exam. One of your main goals in taking an exam is to avoid this difference, or at least to make this difference as small as possible given the constraints of an exam. Part of what you’re being tested on is your ability to organize your knowledge about the subjects I’ve asked you about and put them into coherent writing under a degree of time pressure. This is because writing (often under pressure) and thinking on your feet are two of the marketable skills that the world expects college graduates to have (and pays them for having).

Thus, for instance, if I ask you a question about the coming of the War of 1812, and you forget to mention the Embargo Act, which by any measure is a very important aspect of the coming of the war, then I can’t give you credit for it.

In simple English it boils down to this: I can only grade you on what you actually put in your answer. If you know something that is reasonably related to the question I have asked, but you leave it out of your answer, I cannot give you credit for it. I can only judge you on what you put in your answer.

Furthermore, don’t assume that I know the answer to the question I have asked. Don’t deliberately leave something out and assume that since anyone should know it that I will give you credit. Tell me *everything* you know about it and believe is reasonably related to it, as if you are teaching me rather than vice versa. *Thus, the third way to lose credit on an exam is to leave out information that should be included.* This is related to the next element, which is to ...

4) Leave out of your answer information that is unrelated to the question I have asked. On any given exam, I cannot test you on every single aspect of what has been covered in the course. Instead, the questions on my exam amount to “spot checks” of certain segments of the material. In making this spot check, I both *presume* and *require* that you know all aspects of

the assigned material equally well, and thus I presume that your performance on the questions you answer is representative of your general knowledge of the course material.

Unfortunately, in reality this sometimes may not be the actual case. That is why, on any essay or short answer component (except for makeup exams), I give you a safety net: I give you two essay questions and let you choose which one to answer, and I give you six short answer questions and let you choose which four to answer. This is designed to give you the opportunity to avoid answering any questions that, for whatever reason, you believe you aren't equipped to answer well.

But what if this "safety net" isn't enough, and you aren't sufficiently prepared to answer the number of questions that you're required to? What if, for instance, you don't know a lot about either of the two essay questions you can choose, or you only feel good about two of the short answer questions but you have to answer four? In that case you might feel a temptation to use one of the questions I've asked you as a segue to answering a question I have not asked but which you prefer to answer instead. Maybe you aren't interested in the War of Independence, for instance, so you spent most of your time studying the Civil War instead, but one of my essay questions is about the War of Independence. In that case you might try to use my question as a springboard to try to tell me about the Civil War without telling me much, or anything, about the War of Independence.

Since in theory a student could use this tactic to learn about (and then on the exam write about) one small segment of the course while ignoring the rest—in effect dictating to me what I must test him on—I cannot allow it. On the other hand, if a student misunderstands the material badly enough that he genuinely believes his answer goes to what I have asked, when in reality it doesn't (for instance, the student believes that Civil War material really does belong in a War of Independence answer), that shows a major weakness in his knowledge of the material at a fundamental level. In either case, you are *answering a question I haven't asked* and I can't give you credit for it. (Trial lawyers call this a *nonresponsive answer*.)

Thus, the fourth way to lose credit on an exam is to put information in an answer that should NOT be included in that answer.

→What do I mean by “reasonably related to the question I have asked?” What, exactly, is “unrelated to the question I have asked?”←

In history, humanities, and social sciences, one may often find connections between events that might not at first seem related, but in this case you still have to connect all information to the question I have actually asked in a reasonable way. For instance, if I ask you a short answer question about Prince Henry the Navigator, and you include information about the Battle of Bunker Hill, it is pretty clear that your Bunker Hill information doesn't really go to telling me anything about Prince Henry the Navigator. Of course, you could argue that if Prince Henry the Navigator hadn't helped launch the Age of Exploration there would never have been a Battle of Bunker Hill, but in that sense nearly everything in the course would be related to everything else, such that you would need days to answer the question. Likewise, if I ask a question about the First (Military) Reconstruction Act of 1867, answering that question with information about *The Great Gatsby* is a rather long stretch. *There must be, in my professional judgment, some proximate relationship, based on the material I present in class or covered by assigned material, between the question I ask and the information you include in your answer.* If you don't make that relationship clear in your answer or you don't show it to be based on the

evidence, then it isn't reasonably related to the question I've asked and I can't give you credit for it.

There is some leeway here, and this is one of the things that makes an essay or short answer exam a bit subjective when it comes to grading. If you reasonably believe that the First Reconstruction Act really does have something particular to do with *The Great Gatsby*, and you support this idea with facts and persuasive argument in your answer, I will certainly consider your argument. If you convince me, you could win points that others taking the exam might not. But if in my professional judgment the connection you propose is too weak, you can lose points. Your best approach is to use common sense, your notes, and the organization of your textbook and other materials to decide what the cutoff should be. This is related to the next element, which is to ...

5) Make sure that the facts you put in are accurate/correct. Your best guide here is the old adage "Better to keep your mouth shut and appear stupid than to open it and remove all doubt." Let's say that I have asked an essay question about the American Revolution. Let's further say that you know that the Stamp Act is a crucial part of the American Revolution, and that you guess that if you don't mention the Stamp Act, you will lose some points (you'd be correct about that, by the way). Let's further say that you know the Stamp Act came after the Sugar Act and before the Townshend Acts, and you know that the Stamp Act was a major cause of the taxation without representation argument, and you know some other things about the Stamp Act. But you can't remember whether the Stamp Act was passed in 1765 or 1775. What should you do?

In this case, remember the old adage. Put in everything you are sure is correct about the Stamp Act. Depending on exactly what that is, you may well get a high score. But if you include something clearly wrong—for instance, that the Stamp Act was passed in 1775—that would bring your score down. *Thus, the fifth way to lose credit on an exam is to put information in an answer that is not merely out of place or nonresponsive, as in element four above, but instead is simply wrong.*

6) Make sure that the material you have included in your answer is organized properly. Organization is important. This is another area that makes grading an essay or short answer exam a bit subjective. Generally, on a history exam, the best principles of organization are a) chronology and b) cause and effect. If you write a history of the American Revolution in reverse chronological order, that makes less sense than if you did it in chronological order. If you simply listed events of the Revolution in random sequence (for instance, as they occur to you), without thinking or writing about how one event caused another, or influenced another, or was the result of another, or illustrates another, then that's the worst of all.

To organize your *essay* answer properly, think of the big themes first, and then understand how more specific ideas and facts fit into them. Consider that in History 2111, we look at the French and Indian War as a major segment of the class, and the American Revolution as another segment, and that the French and Indian War caused the American Revolution. Consider that the American Revolution consisted of a sequence of events that have causal relations to each other. The Stamp Act was an effect of Parliament's attempt to raise revenue on the colonies, and it in turn caused a major protest and the development of the idea that Parliament was ignoring the rights of British subjects in the colonies. In History 2112, consider that Reconstruction is a major theme, and that Andrew Johnson's mishandling of Presidential

Reconstruction helped cause a backlash that became Congressional Reconstruction. Consider that the Fourteenth Amendment was a result of this backlash as well as an illustration of what the Radical Republicans thought was wrong with the Johnson program. Start your study and conceptualization with major themes. Then fill those themes in with specific facts. Relate those facts to each other both chronologically and in terms of cause and effect. Failing to do this will result in a disorganized answer in which I can't tell if you understand the relationship between things.

On a *short answer* you reverse this process. Instead of beginning with a big theme, as in an essay question, you are instead beginning a short answer with a specific fact, event or concept—for instance, the Stamp Act, or the Fourteenth Amendment. You need to tell me everything about the fact, event, or concept, but you also need to tell me its importance or significance. This means linking it to a larger era or a chain of events to show how it fits into that era or chain of events. Thus, if I ask you in History 2112 about the Fourteenth Amendment, you must tell me that it made the freedmen citizens and that it provided for equal protection of the laws for everyone, that it disavowed the Confederate war debt, and so on. But to tell about its importance, you must also include that it was one of the main features of Congressional Reconstruction and that the southern states were essentially forced to ratify it by the First (Military) Reconstruction Act. You may also need to tell me that it was involved in both the *Plessy* and *Brown v. Board of Education* decisions if the exam covers those eras (for instance, it is a final exam). If you don't tell me about those larger connections, or the connections you make in your answer don't reflect the actual situation, I can't give you credit for them.

Thus, the sixth way to lose credit on an exam is to write a disorganized answer.

So there you have it. All of this may sound daunting, but keep in mind that in my twenty-five years of teaching, I have learned what students are generally capable of and what can reasonably be expected of them. Passing—even making a high grade—in my classes is far from impossible, but your grade is something that *you earn*. If you are able to understand and apply the above information, and you have a solid understanding of all of the course material, you should be equipped to earn a good grade on an exam with essay or short answer components. Happy studying!