

Essay Exam Tips

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General Strategies

Budget your time. For a typical essay exam, you'll have between 20 and 60 minutes to answer each question. Time management is essential. As a rule, budget each question as follows:

- 15-20% of the time for thinking about the question and outlining a response to it (more on that in a moment).
- 60-70% of the time to write out your answer.
- 10-20% of the time to read it over and make any necessary edits or clarifications.

Use the first 5 minutes of each question to read the question carefully and think out an answer *before* you start composing your answer. Essay questions are usually broad and open-ended, and they generally require some thought to answer. It is rare when a decent answer to occurs to anyone in the first 15 seconds after they've read the question. Take some time to think it out before you start writing!

Once you've thought out your answer, write out a rough outline on scratch paper (or the inside cover of a blue book) just to help you organize your thoughts.

Make sure you really answer the question as it was asked. The question is not a prompt for you to explore anything that might be in the same semantic ballpark. Make sure that you are *explicitly* answering the question that the professor asked. Likewise, if there are other requirements or criteria laid out, make sure you address them explicitly.

Do NOT fuss with grammar, spelling, and minor sentence mechanics. Your time is limited, and I would rather see great ideas sketched out in

rough prose than stupid crap articulated beautifully in Montaigne¹-like prose.

If time is running out on a given question:

- Do NOT try to write inhumanly fast and hope you get lucky.
- Do NOT shortchange the amount of time you have on the next question.
- DO outline the rest of your answer. At least the professor will know where you were heading.

As you respond to the questions, be creative! The answers to some of these questions are not "objective" and don't have "right" answers. Essay questions are intended to reveal how you have internalized and think about the theories/issues discussed in the class. They are not intended to reveal how many nitpicky facts you have memorized.

Grading Criteria

What does a professor look for when she or he grades an essay exam? I suspect there is quite a bit of variations on this, but the basic criteria probably involve the following:

- **Mastery of content.** Have you read and internalized the readings? Do you understand at some level of detail the theories, methodology, and major claims laid out in the readings?
- **Insight.** This is the main reason we give essay exams. We want to see whether students can use (as opposed to regurgitate) the theories they have learned in a class. Most essay exams ask you to explain or

¹ French author (1533-92) generally credited with inventing the essay. If you hate writing essays, he's the one you want to curse.

explicate some complex issue or problem, which you may not have seen before, though you presumably have seen things like it in class. This is your opportunity to show that you can apply the theory and say interesting things that others may not have thought of.

- **Presence of a structured argument.** An essay exam requires you to write an essay, not just a blurting out of potentially relevant drivel. An essay is an argument organized around a topic.
 - It should have a *thesis*, which is your primary argument, your central claim, and your fundamental 1-line answer to the question. This usually is stated near the top of an essay, often in the first paragraph for short essays of the kind you write in essay exams. Manovich's thesis in Chapter 2 is that computer interfaces are now interfaces to culture, and that they have cultural precursors that help explain how they became the way they are.
 - It should have *supporting points*. These are the handful (usually 3-4) main claims that you use to substantiate or defend your thesis. In Chapter 2, Manovich defends his thesis by talking about how the logic of three cultural interfaces—the printed word, cinema, and HCI—come together in computer interfaces, and he talks about each one of these interfaces one at a time.
 - It should have a *conclusion*. The conclusion is *not* the same as the thesis. A thesis is a claim stated up front that you plan to defend. A conclusion occurs once this defense is complete. A good conclusion does something with the thesis, such as state its broader significance, or use it to ask a new and interesting question (that could be taken up in a different essay). Manovich's conclusion in Chapter 2 is that the relationships among the cultural precursors in computer interfaces are dynamic and unpredictable; there is an ongoing war of metaphors; and that we are surely in an early stage of this process, much as cinema was in the early stages of its development 100 years ago.

exams usually measure facts and figures, such as the date Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, the name of the assassin, and the location of the shooting. Essay exams are interested in the facts not so much in themselves, but more in their *connection* to other facts.

The best way to prepare for an essay exam is to look for connections.

If you notice a passage of Manovich seems to be talking about the same topic as a different passage of Johnson, you've noticed a connection. Read the two passages side-by-side, and try to explain their similarities and differences.

If you are watching an MTV video or reading a blog, and you see a certain characteristic that Manovich talks about, you've made a connection. One way to discover these connections is to spend some time playing a video game, surfing the Web, or watching MTV and asking, what would Johnson or Manovich say about this?

If you are taking another class in Telecom or IST, and the professor makes a claim such as, "Multimedia provides a unique way to provide instruction about XYZ," and this makes you think of McLuhan's theories of media, you've made a connection.

Whenever you make a connection like this—and they often come as sudden flashes at strange times—try to think about it, even for one minute, before you let your attention slip away.

Of course, reviewing your notes, reviewing the readings, and reviewing my PowerPoint slides in Oncourse (in order from most to least helpful) is prerequisite to this process. But it is *not* the entire process. To state this more bluntly, simply reviewing my PowerPoint slides in Oncourse is not likely to lead to great essay exam results!

How To Prepare (Making Connections)

Preparing for essay exams is different from preparing for "objective" exams. Objective