



Writing Essay Exams

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The two most important ways to prepare for an essay exam are **anticipation** and **rehearsal**:

ANTICIPATION. Although you might not be able to predict the *specific* questions you will encounter on an essay exam, you can anticipate the *kinds* of questions you will be asked -- and the kinds of answers those kinds of questions require. To do this, you first need to **reorient to the broader perspectives and themes of the course**; e.g., re-read the course description in the course catalog, and re-read the syllabus. As you look over the topics summarized in the course description, **turn each one into the form of a question**. Similarly, turn each topic or section title of the syllabus into the form of a question. You will also find it helpful to **study questions from past exams**, and to **make up questions of your own** based on your readings and your lecture notes.

REHEARSAL. An exam is a performance. To prepare for any performance, you need to **rehearse** by doing the very things that you will do in the performance itself. Just as you need to prepare for a tennis match by actually getting out on the court and playing tennis or to prepare for a piano performance by actually sitting down at the piano and practicing a piece of music, you need to prepare for an exam by actually practicing the tasks you will be asked to do on the exam. For an essay exams, this means trying to **write -- or at least outline -- responses to possible exam questions**.

THREE EXAM QUESTIONS. On the following pages are three exam questions from three actual Harvard final exams.* Each question is accompanied by the description of the course from which the final exam comes and the suggested amount of time one should spend writing an essay in response to the question, given its weighting in a three-hour exam.

In the workspace following each exam question:

- 1) **Translate the "question" into the form of a question, if necessary.** Sometimes essay questions are posed in the form of an actual question, but sometimes they are presented as a statement which we are asked to discuss or evaluate. Turn the statement into a question. This question will then govern your essay; your essay will be a response to it.
- 2) **Make a list of subordinate questions.** In order to answer the governing question, you will probably need to address a number of subordinate questions. These questions will help you "spell out" your answer, providing parts of your argument, background, examples, etc.
- 3) **Re-order the questions on your list.** The order in which questions come to your mind might or might not be the order in which you will want to address them in your essay. Reorder them according to which to which you will want to address first, second, and so on, to form an outline for your essay.

An outline of a response to the first exam question of the exercise is provided as an example. Try the second and third exam questions on your own; sample outlines of responses to the second and third exam questions are provided on the insert. The outlines provided here were presented to the course instructors, who confirmed that essays written with these outlines would be excellent responses to the exam questions.

* The exams referred to in this handout are from courses that were part of Harvard's Core Curriculum. Although the Core has since been superseded by the General Education Curriculum, the exam questions and essay answers nevertheless illustrate how to understand and respond to an essay exam question.

Social Analysis 38. Social Stratification 2505

Aage B. Sørensen

Introduction to knowledge and ideas about the nature, causes, and consequences of social stratification in modern society. Examines the basic dimensions of social and economic inequality in society, and presents the most important theoretical perspectives on the causes of social stratification. Considers the openness of modern society in terms of the degree of inequality of opportunity by family background, race, and gender.

(60 minutes)

Many believe that equalizing educational opportunity for blacks and whites will bring about equality between blacks and whites. Critically evaluate this claim, relying on empirical studies presented in this course.

Main question: Does/can equalizing educational opportunity for blacks and whites bring about equality between blacks and whites? How? Why?

What empirical evidence (i.e., which studies, what examples) support this claim?

What empirical evidence argues against this claim?

How can we understand why some studies support the claim and others do not?

Were the studies measuring different aspects of equality? using different outcome measures? employing different definitions of "equalizing educational opportunity" (e.g., equality of opportunity vs. equality of results)?

Were the studies conducted in different kinds of settings? with different populations of students (students of different ages, genders, races, ethnicities, etc.)? in different political climates?

Did the studies have different assumptions or expectations about the nature, causes, and consequences of social stratification?

Are there factors besides educational opportunity that contribute to social and economic inequality?

What are my own opinions/conclusions with regard to this claim?

How do I define "equality"? Does my definition differ from those in the studies?

What does my analysis of these studies imply for how we should conduct future research into this issue? For how we should shape educational policy? For how we should define "equalizing educational opportunity"?

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Historical Study A-12. International Conflicts in the Modern World 5129

Joseph S. Nye

Why do states go to war? Is America in decline? Is international cooperation possible? How is the nature of power changing? Will economic and ecological interdependence bring new conflicts? To answer such questions, the first half of the course examines the Peloponnesian War, 19th-century antecedents of the 20th-century conflicts (effects of nationalist on European balance of power and the scramble for colonies), and origins and consequences of two world wars. The second half focuses on the main international conflicts since 1945 (Cold War, nuclear weapons, decolonization, regional conflicts, and international economic conflicts) and attempts to control or solve them.

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(80 minutes)

Evaluate the following statement, drawing on the historical cases you have studied in this course:

"Whatever the alleged changes that have occurred in the nature of power in the contemporary world, any system of international relations which fails to base itself on the principles of 'balance of power' will suffer from an instability which will lead more likely than not, to war. This is the lesson to be drawn from the study of international conflicts."

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(See the insert for a sample response.)

Social Analysis 44. Individual and Social Responsibility: A Social-Psychological Perspective 3419*Herbert C. Kelman*

The modern world's centralized state, complex economy, bureaucratization, and multiple group memberships promote diffusion of responsibility. In this context, how do individuals determine responsibility for their own and others' actions? What conditions encourage higher levels of responsibility for their own actions within an organization or society (*individual responsibility*) and for actions the organization or society takes in their names (*social responsibility*)? Topics include conformity, independence, and the relationship between self and society; obedience to legitimate authority; collective responses to injustice, intergroup conflict, and threat of war; and scholars' own responsibility for the direction and consequences of social research and intervention.

(30 minutes)

A study conducted at a small liberal arts college found that many students, in the course of their college experience, increasingly adopted liberal attitudes on social and political issues.

a) Using the concepts of compliance, identification, and internalization, discuss three possible ways in which this change may have come about. Indicate what conditions of that college situation might have contributed to each process.

b) Depending on the process by which these attitudes were adopted, what is likely to be their fate ten years after graduation?

(See the insert for a sample response.)

Sample Responses for the Writing Essay Exams exercise

(Exam question from Historical Study A-12. International Conflicts in the Modern World)

Main question: How does the study of international conflicts support (or fail to support) the claim that any system of international relations not based upon the principles of 'balance of power' will suffer from an instability that is likely to lead to war?

How/why is a 'balance of power' supposed to promote stability and limit the likelihood of war? By what processes?

What are examples of systems of international relations that are based on this principle? Have they indeed been stable and at peace?

What are examples of systems that are not based on this principle? Have they inevitably experienced instability, and has that instability led to war? (Are there counterexamples to the claim -- i.e., systems not based on the principle which suffered no such instability, or instability that did not lead to war?)

What about the "alleged changes" in the nature of power? Do I agree that they are irrelevant?

What are the implications of my evaluation of this statement with regard to international policies in the present and future?

What do I ultimately think of the claim? Is this the lesson I draw, or do I draw some other lesson from the historical cases examined in this course?

(Exam question from Social Analysis 44. Individual and Social Responsibility)

Main question: How do attitude changes come about? How stable are such changes?

a. How might the concepts of compliance, identification, and internalization each account for college students adopting increasingly liberal attitudes?

What are illustrations or examples of how each of these processes occurs?

How might the nature of the particular setting have effected each process or contributed to the results of the study?

What aspects of the academic and social environment of a liberal arts college and what characteristics of the college population might contribute to attitude changes? What about the effects of other conditions of the study, like the measures used to assess changes in attitude, or the particular attitudes assessed?

b. How enduring are attitudes likely to be, once adopted by means of each of these processes? What is likely to happen to students' attitudes after they have left the college setting for a number of years?

What theories and what empirical research support these predictions?

Under what future conditions will attitudes adopted by such processes remain stable, revert, or continue to develop?

(If there's time after addressing the main question: What are the implications with regard to the main themes of the course, individual and social responsibility?)