

## The Essay Examination

### UWF Writing Lab

(from Guth, Words and Ideas)

Learn to write a structured essay examination that makes the best possible use of what you know.

For many students, the most direct test of their writing ability is the essay examination. To improve your own performance on such examination, remember the following points:

1. Study not for total recall but for a writing test. In studying for material, identify the key terms that might provide the focal point for a paragraph or short essay: alienation, irony, agrarianism. Fix firmly in your mind the three or four points you would cover if asked to trace the major step in an argument, or the key stages in a process. Then, for each key term or major point, try to retain a supporting detail that would help you define or illustrate it. Do not merely memorize material; ask yourself practice questions that make you select and arrange materials in different ways to prove a point, to trace a comparison.

2. Memorize verbatim at least some key phrases, definitions, or short passages. These will give an authoritative, authentic air to your writing. Nothing more reliably identifies the student who aims at better than “C” than the sentence that follows a pattern like this:

The term \_\_\_\_\_, which Frederick Marcus defines as “\_\_\_\_\_,” has developed two important applications. . . .

Michael Benchard, whom Thomas Hardy describes as “\_\_\_\_\_,” was aware of his own capacity for impulsive action. . . .

3. Determine exactly what the instructions ask you to do. Do not simply get a general notion of what the question is “about.” Assume the question in a history course is “What do you consider the most important difference between the fall of Greece and the fall of Rome?” Focus on the key word in the instructions: difference. What is the difference? How can you line up material that will bring out this difference as clearly and convincingly as possible? Look also for specific writing instructions: Are you being asked to summarize, to define, to compare, to evaluate, or merely, more vaguely, to discuss?

4. No matter what the pressure of time, take time to structure your answer. Come straight to the point. Especially in a one-paragraph answer, make your very first sentence sum up your key point, or your answer to the question being asked. Then use the rest of the paragraph to explain, support, or argue your point. Select what is clearly relevant; try to avoid a mere rambling effect. Whenever you can, work for a brief outline jotted down on scratch paper before you begin to write.

In addition to these basic points, here are a few practical hints:

\*Bring an extra pen.

\*Budget your time, especially if there are several questions. If you gain five points by treating one question at great length, and then lose twenty-five points by slighting the next two questions, you are twenty points behind.

\*Get a general picture of the examination before you start writing. If there are several questions or topics, work first on those that you feel best qualified to take up.

\*Relax. You will need a cool head to read the instructions without missing an important point.

Study the following essay exam, rated as above average by the teacher. The comments that follow it point out some features likely to have made a favorable impression on the reader.

**EXAM QUESTION** A common type of character in much contemporary literature is the individual who is trapped by a trick of fate, by his environment, or by his own nature. Choose such a character from a short story you have read. Define the trap in which he is caught. Then describe the way in which he struggles, if he does, to free himself.

**ANSWER:** In “\_\_\_\_\_,” Miss Brill finds herself trapped by her spinsterhood and the advancement of age. She is old, as the story tell us, as old as her out-of-date fox fur. She is alone, with no friends, relatives, or close neighbors. This is her trap. Like a bird that will create its own prison in its own territory, Miss Brill makes hers. She does not socialize, nor does she try to make something useful out of her life, but rather preys like a parasite on other people’s more interesting, colorful lives. In her own way, Miss Brill struggles to escape her prison. She daydreams. The world that she lives in is a fantasy world where all people are friendly and relaxed. She “belongs” in this world, whereas in the other world, the real world, she actually belongs to no one.

Quite successfully, Miss Brill loses the real world for a time, but she cannot escape the real world entirely. The real world sticks its head in, in the form of a boy who says, “Ah, go on with you now.” Therefore, she goes home, more aware than ever of her prison’s boundaries and helpless (by her own nature) to do anything else. She can only fly on home to the security and solitude of her cold darkness.

Note the following points about this answer.

- (1) It responds directly to the key term or key idea in the assignment. The assignment asks about a character who is trapped. Note how this word and its synonyms keep echoing throughout the student’s answer: “trapped,” “prison,” “boundaries.”
- (2) The first sentence serves as a topic sentence or thesis statement for the answer as a whole. It gives the brief, clear definition of the “trap” that the question asks for.
- (3) The point about the character’s trying to escape through daydreaming responds to the second part of the question, but note that this part is worked organically into the first paragraph. The student has planned his answer; there are no afterthoughts, no “Oh-I-forgot” effect.