

Essay Tests

Essay tests are difficult to set and to grade. They are often too broad in scope or too vague in their criteria. Essay tests are subjective and often do not measure as much course content as the objective tests. The essay question is useful, however, as a measure of higher order thinking skills. Student responses should indicate the ability to organize facts, integrate concepts, synthesize information, analyze differing points of view, draw conclusions, and so on.

In some instances it is appropriate that the essay be not only a test of mental ability--but also an experience in written expression. Students could be given several options: write a dialogue, develop a story plot, prepare a "brief", write up an interview, etc. This approach allows the student a broader range of formats in which to express and test ideas. The following are various tools to use in grading essays--and to help students understand what you require from an essay question. (The guidelines may be useful with term papers.)

Before the Essay

1. It is useful to ask why the essay question has been assigned. What level of thinking or engagement with the subject matter is to be represented? Do you want the student to cover specific points in the response? How will they know? What set of criteria will be appropriate for grading this essay question(s)?
2. Students will often require practice in the various types of writing (e.g., simple recitation or paraphrasing of material preciously presented, a refutation of a position, support of a position, probing analysis of a problem, examination of plausible alternatives, a convincing appeal, and so on). Most students at the undergraduate or graduate level can improve their thinking and writing skills. Some course instruction can be embodied in a writing exercise. . .offering needed practice and an alternative learning experience.
3. What specific writing accountability is required? Will you deduct for poor grammar and syntax? Spelling errors? Inadequate documentation? Layout? Format? How will the student know what is required? How will you help the student whose second (or third or fourth) language is English?

Preparing the Student for the Essay Experience

1. There are a number of cognitive skills required in good writing. Following are a number of skills which could be used as cues for the creation of practice exercises in your own discipline.

<i>Creativity</i>	(use of imagination, originality)
<i>Objectivity</i>	(open-mindedness, recognition of personal biases)
<i>Perception</i>	(insight, breadth of understanding of related issues)
<i>Knowledge</i>	(grasp of essential facts, knowledge of sources)
<i>Integration</i>	(ability to connect ideas and concepts, synthesis, coordination of information)
<i>Application</i>	(ability to recognize and present the practical use of material or concept)
<i>Communication</i>	(clarity of thought, acceptable grammar and spelling, articulate, readable)
<i>Behavior</i>	(ability to work and plan responses with others; or, ability to do independent research)

2. How will you help the student learn what is required in limiting the scope of the essay response appropriately, focusing on the question, understanding the difference between main points and secondary material, avoiding undue bias and/or sweeping generalizations, interacting with the material (as opposed to simply stating the obvious or reciting quotes), organizing the response, preparing a conclusion?

3. How will the student know the criteria you will use in grading his or her response(s)?
 Create a rubric that will help students see what you look for in an essay presentation. Here is an example:

CRITERIA	Indicate relation of item to your grading system (e.g., ABC, pass, rewrite, fail, credit, noncredit)	COGNITIVE SKILLS PRESENTED	Indicate the importance of the different skills to the grade for this assignment
Superior response: evidence of independent reading and thinking. Demonstrates ability to interact with sources (as opposed to merely quoting).		Creativity (use of imagination, originality)	
The arguments pro and con are well presented. Related material well synthesized and organized. Opposing arguments fairly presented.		Objectivity (open-mindedness, recognition of personal biases)	
Most of the major points related to the issue were covered and commented upon briefly.		Perception (insight, breadth of understanding of related issues)	
(Some) of the major points related to the issue were included in the response.		Knowledge (grasp of essential facts, knowledge of sources)	
Evidence of understanding of the issue, but the presentation is weak (poor organization of ideas, conclusions not based on evidence, poor grammar, etc.).		Integration (ability to connect ideas and concepts, synthesis, coordination of information)	
Some relevant material was included in the response, but grasp of issues underlying the question was incomplete.		Application (ability to recognize and present the practical use of material or concept)	

The response did not really address the issue in the question; but there is evidence of general understanding of the subject or field.		Communication (clarity of thought, acceptable grammar and spelling, articulate, readable)	
The response is very confused; but there was some attempt to deal with concerns out of which the issue could have arisen.		Motivation (evidence that this is a presentation that is of personal interest)	
Very poor response. No organization, no evidence of understanding of the question, no relevance to subject matter.		Behavior (ability to work and plan responses with others; or, ability to do independent research)	

Content Evaluation of Essay

This tool is simply to help you keep track of factors in the evaluation process as you read.

The essay/term paper has:

1. No introduction _____
 2. An introduction but
 - ▶ no stated purpose or intent _____
 - ▶ no summary of approach to be used _____
 - ▶ no outline _____
 3. A body but
 - ▶ no evident chronological order _____
 - ▶ no comparison or contrast of ideas _____
 - ▶ no analysis _____
 - ▶ no definitions or examples _____
 - ▶ no statements of cause and effect _____
 - ▶ lacks detail relevant to the purpose of the essay _____
 - ▶ lacks evidence of ability to relate ideas _____
 - ▶ lacks details from the subject matter that relate to the question _____
- You have discussed with students which factors are important in the response and to what degree.*
4. No conclusion
 5. A conclusion but
 - ▶ the information is irrelevant to the presentation in the body _____
 - ▶ the information is contradictory to the presentation in the body _____
 - ▶ offers no solution to the problem posed in the question _____