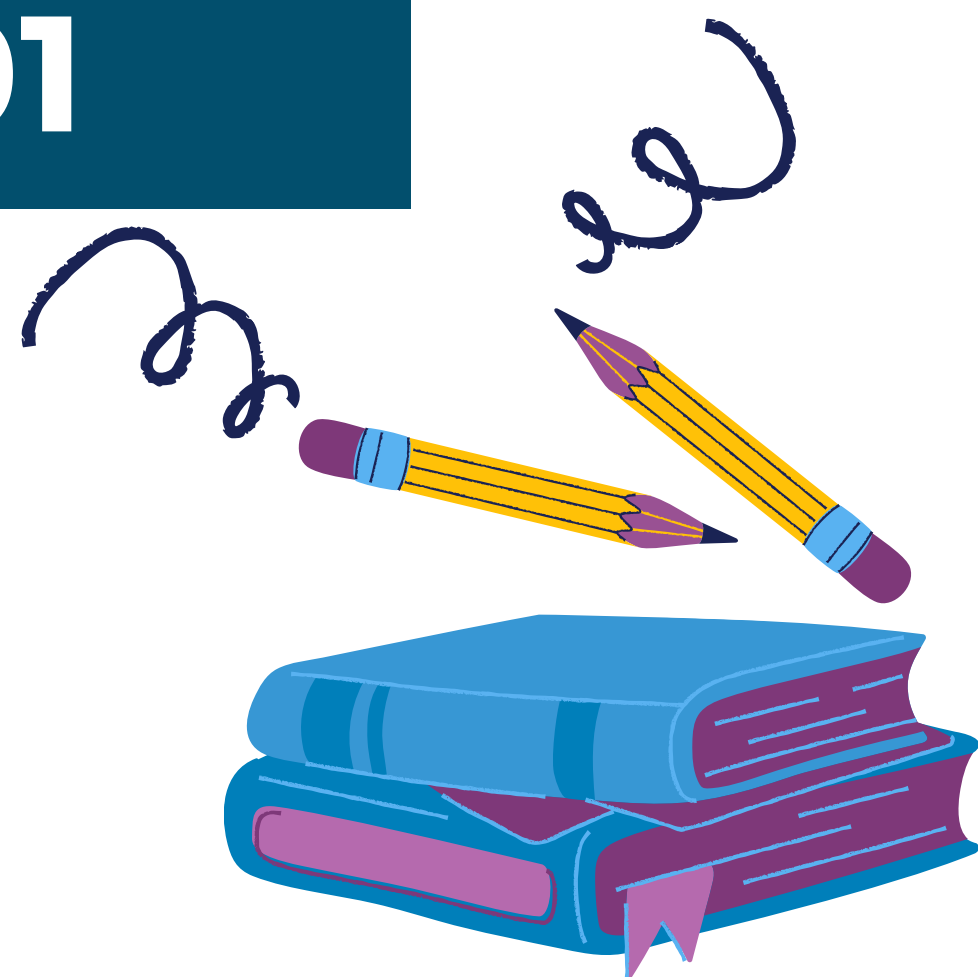


# Essay exam 101



## What is an essay exam?

An essay exam tests your ability to answer the question set, make an argument, and omit unnecessary words. Essay exams commonly evaluate relationships between major concepts and themes in the course.

### Basic structure

An essay exam is meant to follow the same conventions as a formal essay, which means it should have an introduction, a body, and a conclusion that are structured cohesively as a response to the question. Unlike long/short-answer questions, essay exams typically require a thesis statement.

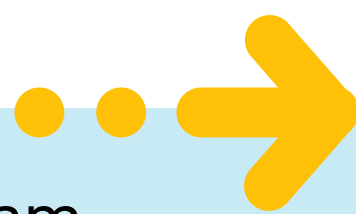
### Closed-book

The **closed-book exam** is where you do not know what the questions will be ahead of time.

### Open-book

The **open-book exam** is where you have access to books and/or notes during the exam. You may even know the exam questions ahead of time.

### Take-home



The **take-home exam** typically involves a short period of time to write and submit your essay online.

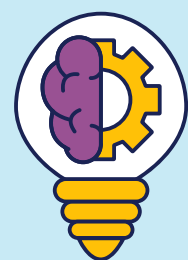
### Pro-tip!

Mind the deadlines and any potential overlap with other coursework and notify your instructor so they are aware of prior commitments!



### What to expect

Essay exams often require you to write several essays in quite a short period of time. This might limit the level of detail, particularly if you are not allowed to bring notes or books into the examination room. You'll find that you need to adjust your writing style when the clock is ticking.



Essay exams assume a "think, then write" model. You are expected to discover, clarify, and organize ideas before writing.



The continuous process of revision is lost in a timed exam setting. Timed essay exams can feel hasty and like an unrevised rough draft.



Critically reflecting on how the exam went is necessary to move forward in the class and better prepare for the next exam.



You may want to visit Student Accessibility and Achievement if you feel that you need additional support.

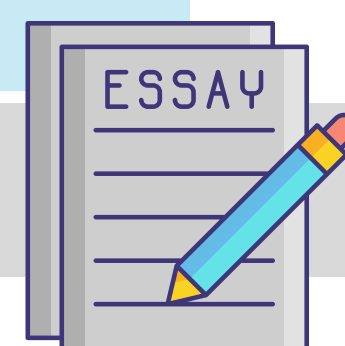


### Other useful resources

- [Writing essay exams](#) (McGill University)
- [Tips for writing](#) (Washington University)
- [Exam preparation: Strategies for essay exams](#) (Simon Fraser)
- [Write a university essay](#) (University of Guelph)



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# Preparing for an essay exam



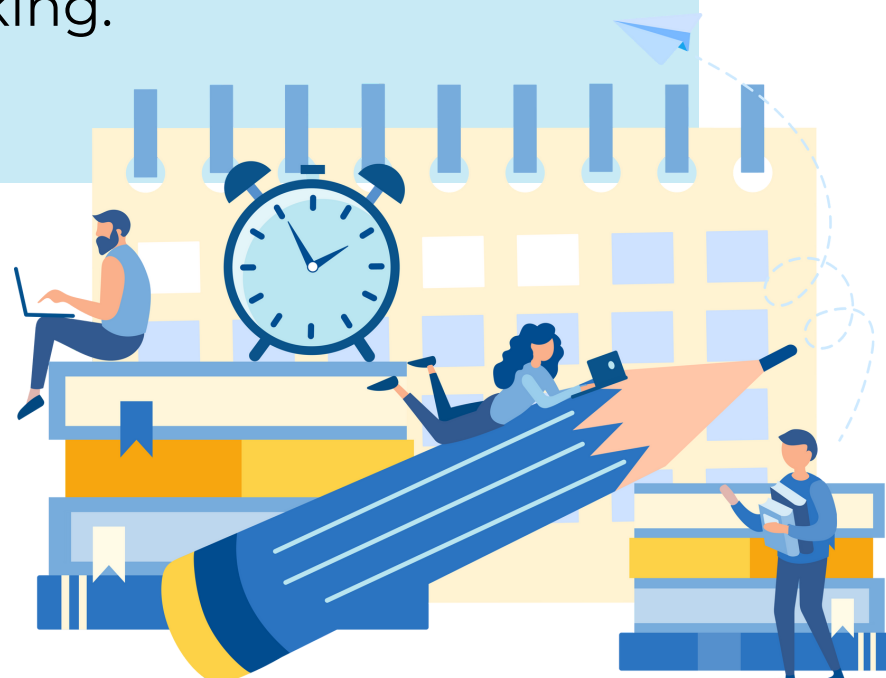
## How to prepare

Study course materials by creating structured outlines or concept maps for issues that cover the key authors and their main points. Who said what? What terms and concepts did they use? What arguments did they use to defend their positions?

**Make connections in advance.** Review the course outline and make conceptual connections between topics. You can also create text-to-text connections and use your lived experience to make text-to-world connections (your arguments will be more convincing if you give creative and critical connections).

**Think critically about the arguments and topics.** Practice arguing for and against a particular view by asking yourself, what is the author's main claim? Identify evidence that supports or refutes this claim. Try arguing for and against a particular claim aloud. These steps will help you weigh arguments and decide which side is more convincing, and why.

**Write practice essays under exam conditions.** You'll find that you need to adjust your writing style when the clock is ticking.



## How to practice

### Practice makes progress!

A useful strategy to prepare for an essay exam is to practice writing under exam conditions. You'll find that you need to adjust your writing style when the clock is ticking. Here's how to practice with a friend:

#### 1 Collect specific practice questions

Write a practice exam question on the same concept with a friend. Use a specific concept that came up a lot in class or one you think might come up in the future.

#### 2 Set a timer for the allotted time

If you have done some timed essay writing before the exam, you will be aware of how quickly time moves and how important it is to focus your answer.

#### 3 Take your friend's practice exam

Exchange questions and test each other! Try answering your friend's question and then discuss. See if your question makes sense in context.

#### 4 Read your practice essay

After reading your practice essays back, ask yourself:

Have I really answered the question set?  
Did I make a good case for the conclusion?  
And, have I omitted unnecessary words?



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