

Essay Exams

Essay exams are designed to test your ability to synthesise information and to organise your thoughts on paper.

Preparing for the exam

Essay exams usually focus closely on a couple of topics. Ask your lecturer how many questions you have to answer in the exam, so you can focus your study on these areas. For example, if you have to answer four questions, select and study four topics in detail, plus one extra in case one of the topics you studied isn't there.

During the exam

Read the exam paper thoroughly.

Not reading questions properly is a common mistake made in essay exams. Therefore, make sure you read each question carefully and be sure you understand exactly what the question is asking. If the question is ambiguous, unclear or too broad, ask for clarification from the examiner in the reading time before you attempt to answer.

Know the terminology.

Make sure you understand the question and are clear about what you are being asked to do. Terms like: **compare, trace, illustrate discuss and evaluate** all have different meanings and will require a different style of answer (see the Academic Guide – “Analysing the question” for more help). If you are unclear what the question is asking, ask for clarification in the reading time before you attempt to answer.

Plan before you write

Don't write your essay off the top of your head - the results will be disorganised and incoherent. Before you start writing, jot down your ideas and organise them into an essay plan.

- You can write a plan on the exam paper itself, or on any spare paper you have with you.
- Begin by thinking about how you will answer the question.
- Note the main information in point form. Doing this will also help you think about your answer.

Answer the 'easy' questions first.

You don't have to answer questions in the order in which they appear in the exam paper. Start with the easiest one first and do the hardest last. This helps to reduce anxiety and helps you think more clearly.

Allocate time

Allocate a set time to complete each question and allow some spare time at the end for checking. For example, two essays in two hours = 55 minutes per question and 10 minutes revision at the end. Do not spend more time than what you allocated otherwise, you won't have enough time to answer the other questions. If you finish the next question early you can always come back.

If you run out of time

Don't panic you can finish your answer in point form. Markers will usually give some marks for correct ideas.

Write clearly

- Print your answers instead of using cursive writing.
- Be aware of grammar, spelling and punctuation.
- If you are using exam booklets, write on every second line.
- If you have time at the end of the exam, proof read your essay for grammatical and spelling errors.
- Leave space in between answers in case you have time to add any information you didn't include in your essays.

Answering the questions

Always answer the question in the introduction. This clearly indicates your answer, use the language of the question. For example:

Question: "How do the goals of liberal and socialist feminism differ?"

You could begin your essay with:

"The goals of liberal and socialist feminism differ in three main ways . . ."

This approach makes sure you answer the question, and makes the exam easier to mark.

Structure your essay

Your essay should follow the basic essay structure and include:

Introduction

An introduction should state your answer and the organisation of the essay. For example:

"The goals of liberal and socialist feminism differ in three main ways. The first is that . . . The second is . . . and the third main area of difference lies in the . . . This essay will argue that although these differences exist in approaches, the practices of liberal and socialist feminism have become very similar".

Body

The body is where you expand your ideas. Make sure you structure the body of the essay as you indicated in your introduction. Use transition words (such as, additionally, furthermore, moreover, and likewise) to tie your ideas together. This will make your essay flow. If you feel you are losing the plot, go back and reread the question and your introduction.

The Body of your essay should include:

- supporting material
- appropriate details for your answer.

Conclusion

In your Conclusion, re-answer the question and refer briefly to the main points in the body. Show HOW you have answered the question. For example:

"In conclusion, it is clear that although liberal and socialist feminism originally held differing views on how to attain their goals, a realistic assessment now shows that their practice has become very similar. This is most clearly illustrated by . . . (give your best example and end the essay).

Good luck!