

Writing Across the Curriculum

Writing Effective Essay Exam Questions

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What Does Writing Studies Research Say?

Stalnaker (1951) offers an early, but still useful, definition of essay exams: they require composition rather than selection; they allow for multiple correct answers; and they require a specialist in their assessment. Compared to other assessment models, such exams call for greater effort from students, can better examine students' engagement with course themes and materials, give students the opportunity to engage in the discourse of the discipline, and require students to use course materials to produce meaning through argument (Bean 2011).

Essay exams are not without drawbacks, however. From a writing-across-the-curriculum perspective, Bean (2011) identifies four major issues. First, they can replace more effective and sustained forms of student writing, so that "writing as testing" takes the place of "writing as learning" (213). Second, the lack of revision usually required by essay exams fails to equate writing with rewriting and revision. Third, a lack of consistency between instructors and exams leaves students scrambling to understand assessment criteria (also see Brown 2010; Jacobs and Chase 1992). And fourth, students generally receive no training in writing essay exams and little useful feedback on their examination essays. Bean offers a number of techniques for minimizing these problems.

Teaching students to write exams. As with any new skill, students cannot perform well without training and practice. Instructors can provide sample exam essays—not just of A-level, but also lower-scoring examples—and model in-class what each grade range looks like. Students also benefit from performing and discussing—practice exams, particularly those that require a thesis-first approach. Finally, allowing students to revise a completed essay after receiving feedback gives

them an opportunity to better understand the genre and build on the previous attempt.

Build process into the exam. While time constraints limit opportunities for drafting during exams, time before the exam can be used to the same effect. Instructors can give students a list of possible questions in advance of the exam date; can permit, and even require, crib sheets (a 3x5" index card, for example) during the exam (these can be taken in with exam booklets); and can provide a list of exam questions at the start of the course, from which students can prepare an exam preparation booklet.

Improve exam questions. Although it may seem that students would benefit from a variety of questions, a surfeit of choice can actually hinder their success (see also Cashin 1987; Jacobs and Chase 1992). Offer students short, focused questions (avoid sub-questions, even those that seem like hints) that require thesis-driven writing; avoid imperatives (discuss, evaluate, analyze), and instead phrase questions that explicitly ask students to support a position.

Five Suggestions For Essay Exams:

1. Use exam questions to measure student engagement, understanding, and argument, not assess recall.
2. Provide models and opportunities to practice exam essay skills.
3. Consider building process-centred writing and revision opportunities into your exams.
4. Provide a limited number of short, position-based questions.
5. Clearly explain to students the criteria by which you will assess the exams.

A Note On Marking In-Class Examination Essays

As point 5 above suggests, students perform better when they understand not only the task, but also how you will assess their performance: the more clearly you can explain this, through models, sample essays, rubrics, and so on, the better your students will perform. In-class exams raise a number of questions specific to the genre: what level of polish do you expect from a (generally hastily) hand-written document? How will you deal with issues of spelling, grammar, legibility, and so on (see Klein and Staub 2005; Bean 2011)? Will you look for specific details, or could intelligent, if general, statements suffice? It may prove useful to consult resources on developing grading rubrics, scoring guides, and other modes of assessment before finalizing your exam questions.

Further, research on writing evaluation by White (1994) offers four techniques for strengthening your grading practices and minimizing the halo effect:

1. Avoid looking at students' names when reading their essays. Students can put their names on the last page or back of the examination booklets.
2. Grade one question at a time, rather than grading each student's booklet cover to cover.
3. After grading each question, shuffle the exam booklets, and record grades on a fresh marking sheet.
4. Go through a number of booklets quickly, to develop a normative baseline for the range of grades. This gives you a set of responses against which you can compare borderline and otherwise difficult to grade essays.

References And Resources

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