WRITING EXAM ESSAYS

Writing essays during a timed exam can feel stressful. This handout offers helpful strategies for studying and navigating the exam.

Studying Tips

Because reviewing a semester’s worth of texts and notes can be overwhelming, it is important to develop a strategic approach to studying. Here’s one that you may find useful:

- Review the syllabus and your course notes
- Reframe your course notes into condensed study notes that reflect major themes
- Use the syllabus to help you identify places where repetition aligns with the course content
- Identify major course themes
- Look for instances of repetition within your notes in order to identify possibly essay topics
- Practice outlining essay answers for each potential topic you have identified

Try organizing your notes into cue cards to both condense and reorder the course material, allowing you to see new connections.

You can also try designing and answering anticipated essay questions. This strategy would work well in a small-group setting as well.

Exam Tips

Understand the Question

- Identify important keywords that will help clarify the approach to the material and the kind of work your prof will be evaluating. This will tell you how to answer the question.
- Possible keywords: analyze, describe, evaluate, compare, contrast, apply, identify, explain, discuss
Organize Your Time

- Use the amount of time allotted for the exam in addition to the weight of each question to determine how much time to spend on the essay.
- Leave yourself a few minutes to outline and revise each question.
- Stick to your plan—don’t be alarmed when other students leave the exam before you’re finished!

Outline and Plan

- Develop an outline that includes a thesis, main points for each body paragraph, specific examples you will use to support your main points, and a brief conclusion.
- Your thesis should answer all aspects of the exam question.

Write

- Your writing needs to be legible—your prof can’t give you marks for sentences they can’t read.
- Refer frequently to your outline to keep yourself on track.
- Answer “so what?” by deliberately explaining the significance of your evidence and how it answers the exam question.
- Avoid repetition.
- Edit and revise your answers.

Bring your student card and all necessary writing utensils to the exam.