Cape Breton University

WRITING CENTRE

Top Tips for Writing Essays in Exams

Yes, you can prepare for exam essays and approach them strategically, using these tips from CBU Writing Centre writing advisors and veteran exam-essay writers!

1. Know the course material well enough that you can apply it in essay answers as needed.

2. Have a solid understanding of basic essay form so you can use it to structure any essay you write.

3. Sleep and eat well before the exam. Writing an in-class essay is a bit like giving a mini-performance. You want to be at your sharpest so you can perform (think and write) clearly.

4. Make sure you read the essay question(s) **very carefully** (at least 2 or 3 times) so you are sure of what it is asking. Circle or underline the main words. Try to rephrase it for yourself in your own words. You can write a great essay, but if it's off-topic, it will not be a very successful one.

5. Don't underestimate the importance of taking time to **think** and **plan** for the essay you are about to write. Try really hard to decide on your thesis and topic sentences before you begin writing. To do this, brainstorm ideas using techniques such as listing, freewriting, or mindmapping. Then use these to form a rough outline of your thesis and main points.

6. Commit to an answer: don't start second-guessing yourself partway through and start over. This way you are less likely to be unable to finish the essay.

7. If you are given the essay question(s) beforehand, plan your response and then when you get to the exam, do a memory dump (writing down your thesis, main points, facts, and examples in point form), so you don't forget something you want to say.

8. Give yourself an approximate timeframe for writing each paragraph, and during that time focus just on fulfilling the job of that paragraph (e.g., to introduce the topic generally and then give your thesis, or to show that historical figure X is significant because…).

9. Take short breaks when you need them to rest your hand, stretch your back, or take a nice long deep breath! And remember, the exam will be over soon enough!

10. Leave yourself 5-10 minutes at the end of the exam to proofread and make minor edits.

11. When the exam is over, let it go, and be proud of yourself for giving your best effort.