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North Vancouver Campus

Student Success
Workshops

Exam Writing Strategies



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Exam Writing Strategies

Writing exams is stressful for most students. However, being well prepared and implementing effective exam writing strategies are the keys to doing well on exams. An effective review plan refreshes previously learned information in memory, while implementing exam writing strategies during the test, helps you to show what you know and maximize your marks.

Students write many different types of exams. This handout however, will focus on the four most common types of exam questions: True/False, Multiple-Choice, Short-Answer, and Essay.

Getting Started

Regardless of what type of exam you are writing, there are a few general exam writing strategies that apply to all types of exams and help to get you started.

- Sit in the very front row and against a wall if you are easily distracted by the other students in the room.
- Try to relax by breathing deeply and slowly and by using positive self-talk i.e. “you can do this; you have studied hard; just take it one step at a time”
- If you are worried about forgetting an important formula, date, fact, etc. find a blank place on the test (usually the back page) and jot this information down before you start answering the questions. These are called “memory notes”.
- Preview the exam as a whole to determine:
 - **the format of the exam.** What types of questions will you have to answer? If there is an essay question at the end, read the question through so your subconscious can be working on it while you write the first part of the test.
 - **how to allocate your time.** Make sure you have time to address all the questions asked without running out of time. Allocate more time for questions worth more marks. Don’t spend too long on any one question. If you are having trouble with a question, leave it and come back to it later.
 - **where in the exam you should start.** Start with an easy question or a type of question that you prefer i.e. True/False. This will increase your confidence and lower your anxiety for tackling the more difficult questions later in the test.

- Read the exam directions and the exam questions very carefully. Misreading one word or making assumptions about what you have to do can result in lost marks.

True/False Questions

True/False questions test your knowledge of the factual details of a subject. They consist of a statement which is true, partially true, or entirely false. While a good grasp of the factual details of your material is essential, students often lose marks on True/False questions because they do not read the statements carefully enough. Below are a few tips to help you analyze and read the statements carefully before deciding on an answer:

- **Watch for modifiers in the statement.** For example, “Twins are sometimes genetically identical”. *Sometimes* is the modifier in this statement. Modifiers tend to influence the meaning of statements and hence your answer. Extreme or 100% modifiers are words like: All, Always, Every, Only, Best, Never, Nobody, Worst, etc. These modifiers tend to make statements false, as they make statements too extreme. In-Between modifiers are words like: Usually, Sometimes, Often, Most, Frequently, etc. These modifiers tend to make statements true as they make statements less absolute and more moderate.
- **Watch for negative words in the statement.** For example, “An organized desk is not an external distractor when studying”. Negative words in statements are confusing because we usually learn what things “are” rather than what they are “not”. To avoid getting confused, remove the negative word and decide whether the statement in its positive form is true or false. If the statement is true in its positive form, it will be false in the negative and visa versa.
- **Watch for lists of facts in the statement.** For example, “Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Purple, and Violet are all colors of the rainbow”. In statements that list a number of facts, read all the facts listed carefully. If they are all true the statement is true; however, if even one of the items listed is false, the entire statement is false.
- **Watch for two part statements.** For example, “The right side of the brain deals with creativity while the left side deals with spatial relations”. In two part statements, both parts must be true in order for the entire statement to be true.
- **Watch for definition clues in statements.** Definition clues are words such as “means, are called, defined as, referred to as, etc. Make sure that the definition given after the definition clue accurately describes the term in the statement.
- **Watch for relationship clues.** These are words like, “increases, produces, effects, result, causes, reason, etc. When you see these relationship clues, think carefully about the relationship being discussed to determine if it is the correct relationship.

Writing Multiple-Choice Questions

Like True/False questions, Multiple-Choice questions also test your knowledge of the factual details of a subject. However, they tend to be more difficult than True/False statements as you have several options to consider and choose between rather than just one. For this reason, it is important to approach multiple-choice questions strategically. Several strategies for approaching multiple-choice questions are suggested below:

- **Read the test directions carefully.** Don't make any assumptions about the test directions. You might be asked to find the best option rather than just the correct one. You might be able to indicate more than one correct answer, so, make sure you read the directions before you start.
- **Read each question carefully.** When you are nervous, you tend to misread questions. To avoid misreading questions you can:
 1. Cover-up the options so they don't distract you while you read the question.
 2. Read the question twice especially if it is fairly wordy.
 3. Carefully underline the key words in the question as you read it. For example:

Q. Which of the following is not a symptom of stress?
- **Evaluate each option as a true/false statement eliminating all the false answers.** This strategy stops you from getting overwhelmed by all the options. Take each option in turn treating each as a true/false statement. Eliminate the false statements and choose between the options you consider to be true. For example:
 - In the listening process, *Assignment of Meaning*
 - a) occurs before the attention and response steps. **F**
 - b) requires the listener to interpret a message. **T**
 - c) involves the listener responding with a question. **F**
 - d) requires the listener to relate the message to something they already know and to interpret the message without distorting it. **T**
- **Read ALL the options given.** If the first or second option is true, make sure you read all the other options, as a later option may be a better answer.
- **Use several levels of response: Immediate, Delayed, Assisted, & Guess.** Once you have analyzed all the options, only make an **immediate** response if you are 100% sure of the answer. If you are not 100% sure, **delay** your response by marking the option and continuing with the next question. At the end of the test, return to all your unanswered questions and see if any other information from the test **assists** you to decide on an answer. If you still do not know the answer, make an educated **guess**, as you have a one in four chance of getting it right.

Answering Short-Answer Questions

Short-answer questions tend to be more difficult than true/false and multiple-choice questions as you have to recall the information directly from memory without any clues. To do well on these types of questions, it is important to predict possible short-answer questions and practice

recalling the answers from memory. If you have prepared well, the following tips will help you to show what you know on the exam:

- **Plan your answer before your start to write.** Because you have a limited amount of space to express your knowledge, it is important to be clear on what you want to say and how you are going to say it before you put pen to paper.
- **Limit your answer to fit the space provided.** Don't spend time and energy making your answer too long. You are aiming for quality not quantity in a short-answer response. If allowed, use point form to avoid being too wordy.
- **Include an example if you feel you are not explaining yourself well.** Rather than explaining the same point three different ways, give an example instead, as a picture paints a thousand words.
- **Use modified print if your handwriting is indecipherable.** If you know your handwriting is poor or difficult to read, print rather than use cursive to be sure your teacher can read your answer.
- **Use the point value of the questions to guide how much you say.** As a rule, the more points a question is worth, the more details or points you should include in your answer.

Long Answer/Essay Questions

Long Answer or essay questions are usually considered the most difficult because you have to recall and often recreate knowledge from memory and then express what you know in the form of an academic essay. As a result, it is important that your writing skills are strong before you take classes that require a lot of essay based testing. While writing essay questions is a challenge, you can make it easier by following the strategies outlined below:

- **Read the directions carefully.** Essay question directions can really vary. You may be able to choose from a number of questions, or may have one mandatory question and one you can choose. So don't make any assumptions, and if the directions are unclear, make sure you asked your teacher before you proceed.
- **Budget your time.** Because essay questions are usually worth a lot of marks, it is important that you do not run out of time. Decide how much time you have per question and watch your watch closely.
- **Read each question carefully.** One way students loose marks on essay questions is that they do not answer every part of the question, or they misinterpret the question being asked. To avoid making these mistakes:
 1. underline the key words in the question and rephrase in simpler terms, if possible.
 2. note how many parts to the question there are (how many things you have to discuss).
 3. make sure you understand the directive word used i.e. compare, discuss, analyze, trace, etc.

Following is a list of commonly used directive words and their meanings:

Directive Word	Definition
Compare	Show the similarities and difference between two or more items.
Contrast	Show the differences between two or more items.
Describe	Give a detailed account or description – paint a clear picture for your reader.
Discuss	Give the main ideas on the topic and expand them with specific supporting details and examples.
Define	Give the specific definition and expand with details.
Explain/Justify	Give reasons, tell why, show cause and effect.
Trace/Outline	Discuss the sequence of events in chronological order.
Summarize	State the main ideas or points only.
Evaluate/Critique	Discuss the pros and cons, strengths and weaknesses, advantages and disadvantages, and support your position with facts and details.

- **Make a basic outline.** Before you start to write your essay, make a basic outline to follow. To do this, brain storm your ideas on scrap paper and then decide on the order in which you want to discuss your ideas. This process will take a few minutes but will result in a more organized, logical discussion. Your instructor is looking for quality not quantity. Your outline can be in the form of a formal outline, a mind map, or a random list of ideas that you label to indicate the order in which you wish to discuss them.
- **Use standard essay format to write your answer.** Instructors expect your essay to be in the form of a standard academic essay. This includes a brief introduction with a thesis statement, clear body paragraphs, and a brief conclusion. They also expect the essay to be written double spaced, to be grammatically correct, and have few spelling mistakes. Multiple grammar and spelling mistakes will detract from the content of your essay.
- **Proof read your essay.** Before handing in your essay, proof read your essay for careless mistakes such as spelling error, punctuation, missed words, etc. If you need to make a correction, carefully cross out the incorrect word and rewrite the correction on the line above.

While exam writing strategies are no substitute for studying hard and knowing your material, they can help you show what you know and help you to avoiding making careless mistakes.

For more information or help with exam writing, please make an appointment with the Learning Specialist at the North Vancouver Campus by calling 604.984.1744.