



# Writing Matters

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## Designing Essay Exams

SuEllen Shaw

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"I would give more essay exams, but . . ." You fill in the concluding clause (they take so much time to grade, or they're so frustrating to grade, or I never get quite what I want, or students write so poorly . . .). One of the preceding reasons might be yours, or you might have a completely new one. Although essay exams can be very problematic, they can provide students with a valuable learning experience—especially if they occur early enough in the term for students to get your feedback and evaluation. Generally essay exams fall into the category of informal writing since the writing is unrehearsed and unpolished. They can give you important insights into what students are learning and how they are applying that knowledge.

According to Rebecca Moore Howard and Sandra Jamieson in *The Bedford Guide to Teaching Writing in the Disciplines* (1995), we can design exams for accurate evaluation and for effective teaching if we take the time to do so. They give the following pointers for designing effective essay exams:

### 1. Decide whether a traditional, staged, sequenced, or take home exam best fits your course goals.

We have all taken, if not given, the traditional exam where the student has one to two hours to answer a series of short essay questions or two or three longer ones. A staged exam offers a series of questions about a single issue with all the answers combining to form a coherent whole by the end of the exam. For example, in a literary criticism class, a staged question might ask students to evaluate a single text from a number of theoretical standpoints (feminist, deconstructionist, or archetypal). A sequenced exam, on the other hand, asks a series of questions on more than one topic. Answers to the early questions provide information necessary to answer longer questions at the end of the test. This might be a useful format in an economics test or marketing exam. A take-home exam allows some polished writing, especially in larger classes, where a professor might not be inclined to assign longer papers because of the grading time. In giving take-home tests, professors might typically set a time or page limit for each question. This procedure creates briefer answers that are more manageable to grade perhaps than a series of research papers.

### 2. For in-class exams, make sure the questions are specific, demanding precise knowledge.

Short, very specific questions work best for in-class exams because students can use their time developing the answer rather than interpreting the question. In addition, the question should not invite generalities, but instead provide specific information for a definite purpose. An example from Howard and Jamieson gives a question from an Economic Issues—Method of Inquiry class:

*"To a Hindu farmer with a large field, what is the opportunity cost of killing a cow for its beef?" (150).*

If a student does not know the meaning of "opportunity cost," she cannot fake it. The answer also must consider the interaction of economics and cultural values, presumably applying information from text and course.

### 3. Write questions that are brief, clear, and easy to understand.

Phrase the questions using familiar vocabulary from the course. Don't use the exam as an opportunity to introduce new technical terms. Such a ploy only confuses students and produces vague writing. Howard and Jamieson caution that this does not mean that exams ask only for material rehearsed in class. On the contrary, many exams ask students to consider new materials using methods practiced in class.

### 4. Word questions to suggest strategies for answers.

Using key terms such as *analyze*, *predict*, *describe*, or *evaluate* tends to produce more effective essays than the more vague *discuss* or *comment on* imperatives do. Likewise, a question such as "Can you explain your observations," a follow-up to a larger descriptive or analytical question, only confuses: Is the professor asking for an explanation or for a "Yes"/"No" answer?

Jamieson gives a sample question that did not work, one that was used in her Roots of Western Civilization class:

*"Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them." Discuss the life and character of Moses based upon this quotation. (154)*

The question is too general. Most students used plot summary and said little of substance to justify their selection of one category—they had few other options, according to Jamieson.

Had the instructor followed the next pointer in designing exams, she might have been able to predict the problem and revise the question.

### 5. Write out your own answers to the questions to determine whether they can be answered satisfactorily in the allotted time.

A revision of the above question presents a focus and strategy for students answering the question and also makes the answer easier to evaluate than originally:

“Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.” It could be argued that Moses illustrates this principle. Select three incidents from Exodus that support or contradict this assertion and use them to describe the life and character of Moses. (155)

The revised question requires specific knowledge rather than a general plot summary. It also implies a strategy and organization for answering the question, which should produce a better answer than otherwise.

Thoughtfully developed questions become effective learning tools for students, helping develop their critical thinking skills and giving them strategies for approaching problem solving in other areas as well.

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## Following Directions

Source: Fulwiler, Toby. *Teaching With Writing*

- Analyze:** Take apart and look at something closely.
- Compare:** Look for similarities and differences; stress similarities.
- Contrast:** Look for differences and similarities; stress differences.
- Critique:** Point out both positive and negative aspects.
- Define:** Explain exactly what something means, clearly differentiating it from other terms in the same class.
- Describe:** Show what something looks, feels, smells, sounds or tastes like.
- Discuss:** Explore an issue from all sides; implies wide latitude.
- Evaluate:** Make a value judgment according to some criteria (which it would be wise to make clear).
- Explain:** Clarify or interpret how something works or happens.
- Illustrate:** Show by means of example, picture, or diagram.
- Interpret:** Translate how, why, or so what; implies some subjective judgment.
- Justify:** Argue in support of something; to find positive reasons.
- List:** Order facts, attributes, or items in sequence.
- Outline:** Organize according to hierarchy and/or category.
- Prove:** Demonstrate correctness by use of logic, fact, or example.
- Review:** Reexamine the main points or highlights of something.
- State:** Assert with confidence.
- Summarize:** Pull together the main points.
- Synthesize:** Combine or pull together pieces of concepts.
- Trace:** Present an outline or show a sequence of how or why something occurs or happened.

Common definitions of direction terms can help us be consistent across the curriculum in our expectations for particular writing and speaking outcomes.

## Where is The Write Site?

Located in Lommen 95, the Write Site provides an informal, friendly and private atmosphere for students to share their writing and writing questions.

### Hours are:

Monday-Thursday	9:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.
Friday	9:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.
Selected Evenings at Livingston Lord Library, room 208	8 p.m. - 10 p.m.

Your students may either make an appointment to visit with a tutor, or just drop in. Since we cannot guarantee that a tutor will be free at that time, scheduled appointments are encouraged. Services are offered free of charge to the MSUM community.

This is also where you'll find SuEllen Shaw if you want to consult with her about writing plans for your classes.

477-5937 (Appointment)

477-5938 (Director)

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