

## HOW TO PREPARE FOR AND WRITE AN ESSAY EXAM

You can prepare thoroughly for an essay exam at home by following a few simple guidelines. First, predict the questions you expect on the test at home. Simply use the essay test direction words listed on pp. 147-148 to turn chapter titles and subtitles into questions. You can use this same guideline to form questions from the main ideas in your lecture notes. Then after studying the material write an answer to the question(s). You will want to review this answer several times and reduce it to an outline in your head that you can use when you arrive at the exam room. If your teacher gives you a study guide to prepare for the exam, use the same technique. Review your lecture notes and underlining/marking in your textbook and write an answer to each question on the study guide. Then learn your answer by reducing it to an outline that you can remember and use during the exam.

Let's look at each of these steps individually.

---

### **PREDICTING AN ESSAY QUESTION**

To predict a question, look at the key words in the chapter title and subtitles and think about their relationships. Next try to apply the information to an actual or hypothetical situation.

For example, let's look at a chapter that contains the following title and subtitles:

#### **BODY TEMPERATURE AND ITS REGULATION**

Normal Body Temperature

Heat Gain

Heat Loss

Processes by which Heat is Lost

Avenues of Heat Loss

What is it you think your professor will want you to know about the regulation of body temperature in the chapter title and subtitles listed above? As you think about this, remember that it's not enough just to define the terms such as heat loss or be able to list avenues of heat loss, but you must also be able to **apply** how these processes work in different climatic conditions etc.

*A question you might predict would be:*

Explain what you understand by normal body temperature. Then contrast the processes by which the body uses chemical thermoregulation to gain heat versus physical thermoregulation to lose heat. Finally, analyze the environmental factors that must be present in order for a human to maintain normal body temperature.

---

## WRITING THE ANSWER

First, brainstorm an answer. Jot down key words in outline form that will organize your answer to the question. An example outline might be:

1. range of normalcy
2. chemical thermo-  
basal metabolism
- Physical thermo -  
radiation  
conduction  
convection
3. examples:  
humid conditions  
outside temperature  
clothing

Then write a **short** introductory paragraph that **answers** the question and outlines each paragraph in the body of your essay. As you write this sentence(s), try to structure and transition your essay so that it is easy to read and follow. Review the organizational

patterns discussed in Module 4. For example, I will explain that normal body temperature is actually a range. Then I will illustrate how basal metabolism in chemical thermoregulation serves to increase body temperature. I will contrast that to heat loss in which physical thermoregulation affects the processes of radiation, conduction and convection. Finally, I will discuss some climactic factors that must be present for a human to maintain normal body temperature.

Note that the introductory sentence above responds to the direction words in each of the three parts of the above question -- **explain, contrast and analyze**. Also the writer did not just repeat key words like normal body temperature but indicated what his answer will be. For example, there is no one body temperature but a range.

Secondly, write a separate paragraph to expand and support the ideas in the body of your essay. A paragraph should consist of 6-7 sentences. It should NOT be either one sentence or a whole page. For example you will write three more paragraphs in the body of this essay. One paragraph will explain what a normal body temperature is and how it may change. The next paragraph will note the differences between the processes in physical and chemical thermoregulation. The last paragraph may give examples of outside temperatures, apparel or other factors that would affect a human's ability to survive.

As you write your answer, use language that is clear and direct. Do not try to pad your answer with a lot of extraneous information. Follow the outline you jotted down before writing out the answer as discussed in the videotape. Do not be afraid of the terms used in lecture and in the textbook such as radiation etc. These terms best describe the processes being discussed and will be meaningful to your professor. Use as many examples and facts as possible to support your thesis. Do not give your opinion unless it is asked for by the essay question direction word such as justify, prove etc.

## USE ESSAY QUESTION DIRECTION WORDS TO PREDICT AND THOROUGHLY UNDERSTAND ESSAY QUESTIONS

The following explanations of essay question direction words can help you both to predict good essay questions at home and to thoroughly understand and correctly answer essay questions in the exam room. They have been categorized according to their level of difficulty. For the first group, it is often enough to simply memorize and correctly **explain a term**. For the second group, you must be able to see the **relationships** between the ideas and terms. In the third group, you are being asked to **apply** the information in a new situation or critically analyze a situation giving your own opinion. The more deeply you study and prepare at home using all three levels of questions; the better prepared you will be for an essay exam.

### 1. At the definition level:

Describe	Means to write a <u>detailed account</u> or verbal picture in a logical sequence or story form.
Discuss	Means to describe giving the <u>details</u> and explaining the <u>pros and cons</u> of it.
State	Means to describe the <u>main points in precise</u> terms. Be formal. Use <u>brief, clear</u> sentences. Omit details and examples.
Define/Explain	Means to give the <u>formal meaning</u> by distinguishing it from related terms. This is often a definition to be memorized.
List/Enumerate	Means to produce a <u>numbered list</u> of words, sentences or comments.
Trace	Means to follow the <u>progress or history</u> of the subject

### 2. At a deeper, more interpretive level

Compare	Means to show both the <u>similarities and differences</u> .
Contrast	Means to compare by <u>showing the differences</u> .
Diagram	Means to make a <u>graph, chart, or drawing</u> . Be sure to label and add brief explanation if necessary.
Illustrate	Means to explain or make it clear by concrete examples.

comparisons, or analogies.

Summarize Means to give a brief account of the main ideas. Omit details and examples.

Outline Means to give a general summary. It should contain a series of main ideas supported by secondary ideas. Show organization. Omit details.

### 3. At the deepest level, you apply and evaluate information

Review Means to give a survey or summary in which you look at the important parts and criticize where needed.

Prove Means to show by argument or logic that it is true. The word prove has a special meaning in mathematics and physics.

Interpret Means to give the meaning using examples and personal comments to make the ideas clear.

Evaluate Means to give your opinion or some expert's opinion of the truth or importance of the concept. Tell the advantages and disadvantages.

Justify Means to give a statement of why you think it is so. Give reasons for your statement or conclusion.

Kathleen D Thayer  
Director Academic Success Center  
Purdue University

---



**PURDUE**  
UNIVERSITY