The Essay Examination

Students who master the techniques of writing under pressure in response to essay examinations succeed in college. Their academic survival hinges on how well they can adapt what they learn about crafting an essay to examination conditions, where time is limited, topics are restricted, and tensions run high. But as Chapter 11 reminds them, they can use a number of familiar writing strategies to gain the confidence and sense of control they need to perform well under stress. The five guidelines offer clear and sensible advice, and the examples of well-written and less well-written answers are explained so students understand why one answer is superior to another.

If your college or university requires students to pass a writing competency exam to complete the composition sequence or to attain upper-class standing, the advice in this chapter might be used to help prepare students for the examination. The writing assignments at the end of the chapter can be adapted as practice exam questions. The questions preceding the readings might also be used for practice examinations. You might explain the “practice sessions” as “writing calisthenics” that can strengthen reading and writing abilities and help prepare students for taking timed examinations. No one likes to take exams, and few teachers really like giving them, but they are a fact of academic life.

READ THE QUESTION CAREFULLY

As elementary as the advice “Read the question carefully” may appear, it bears repeating. You might want to suggest that students underline key words, such as compare, explain, contrast, and argue, that refer to one of the patterns of development discussed in Chapter 5. Remind students of the organizational strategies suggested by these key words and of the importance of re-reading the question both before writing and while drafting answers.
One problem students sometimes encounter in reading and analyzing the demands of a particular essay question is the question that poses a series of questions. Students are often unsure which one to answer. Consider this example:

Using Le Corbusier’s Savoye House and Frank Lloyd Wright’s Kaufmann House as typical examples, contrast the architectural styles of these two men as expressions of their beliefs of what a house should be. How do these beliefs affect the allocation of space? To what different ends do the men use line and material? How can their works be said to show different attitudes toward technology?

Your class might analyze this question or others like it and elaborate the strategies for answering such questions. In this example, the central question seems to be embedded in the first statement, and the questions that follow are really clues about how to develop the answer. In such questions, the task is often posed in the first or second sentence, and then additional questions are offered to generate possible lines of development.

**THINK OUT YOUR ANSWER BEFORE WRITING**

Advise your students to think out their answers after reading the question and considering key words. Rereading the question, taking a deep breath, and spending even sixty seconds or so pondering what’s being asked can be a great help to all students and especially to students who tend to panic in examination conditions. Students can also learn to anticipate questions by reviewing class notes, discussions, and dominant themes in the course texts.

**WRITE A COMPLETE ANSWER, BUT DO NOT PAD YOUR ANSWER**

It’s obvious to most teachers when the answers they are reading are padded. Probably the most common reason for students’ failure to write complete answers is their tendency not to include enough evidence to support their generalizations. Most teachers have in mind what constitutes a complete answer, and the student must demonstrate knowledge of this information and draw conclusions from it. Equally important for courses such as literature that ask for convincing “readings” of texts is the construction of a logical argument. Teachers often use a rough answer scale ranging from low to high: (1) responses that are minimally adequate, (2) answers that address the question, and (3) answers that offer original insight in addition to completeness.
A hint about good essay answers is that often they directly answer the question in the first sentence, and this sentence becomes the central argument. Essay exams are not the time to use a catchy or lengthy lead. In each of the better answers that follow, students will find that the writer answers the central questions in the first sentence, then develops and supports this answer in the subsequent paragraphs.

**PROOFREAD YOUR ANSWER**

Stress to your students the importance of proofreading their answers, because when reading their work, they are likely to find some errors that could interfere with the actual meaning of the answer they have tried to give. Most instructors are happy to find carets and cross-outs on examination responses, because they indicate a thoughtful crafting of the answer.

**Review Exercises (pp. 297–302)**

1. This straightforward question calls for an interpretation of Laertes’ statement, which the writer then supports with facts from the play.

   Answer 1 is clearly the better answer. The writer offers an interpretation or answer in the first sentence: “Laertes’ statement . . . is best understood as a request to let bygones be bygones.” The writer then uses the “facts of the play” to support his interpretation: Hamlet did not put poison on the tip of the sword that killed Laertes, and Hamlet mistakenly killed Polonius, thinking Claudius was behind the curtain. The writer concludes by expanding on the opening statement, offering a fuller interpretation of the comment’s significance in terms of the overall play—“I interpret the statement to mean: ‘We have both been the victims of the king’s treachery. Forgive me for your death, as I forgive you for mine and my father’s.’”

   Answer 2 fails to answer the question posed; the writer offers no interpretation of Laertes’ comment. It seems as though the writer did not read the question at all but simply saw the reference to Laertes’ final speech in *Hamlet* and took off, summarizing the events that led up to that scene.

2. This question calls for comparison/contrast, so the wise student will set up the answer according to one of the comparison/contrast patterns explained in Chapter 5.

   Again, answer 1 is clearly superior. This writer, too, begins the essay with a direct answer to the question, in this case stating the chief differences between neurosis and psychosis. The student prudently qualifies these
differences by asserting that “the boundary between the two cannot be precisely drawn.” Furthermore, the writer explains the rationale behind the choice of supporting examples: “The differences are best illustrated at their extremes.” The next two paragraphs complete the answer by offering clear, contrasting examples—the redhead-dreading woman and the delusional Moses. Organizationally, the answer is a model of the divided pattern of comparison (A + B) discussed in Chapter 5.

Answer 2, although mentioning both neurosis and psychosis, never directly answers the question. Apparently, the writer is particularly interested in defense mechanisms (or took good notes in class the day the professor discussed defense mechanisms) because most of the answer is devoted to this subject, which is only tangentially related to the question. The writer has the beginnings of a direct answer to the question in the second sentence of the second paragraph, but this assertion is buried and never developed.

3. Here again the answer calls for comparison/contrast analysis.

Answer 1 is stronger because it directly answers the question, reflects careful thought and organization, and is complete. Like the other two better answers, answer 1 begins with a thesis statement that answers the question: “These two maps provide a dramatic contrast between the geopolitical and theoretical concepts of border.” The geopolitical concept of border is then explained and subdivided into natural, historical, and political borders. The theoretical concept of border, illustrated by Joel Garreau’s map, ignores geopolitical criteria for designating borders and instead uses criteria based on economic and ecological concerns.

Answer 2 contrasts the appearances of two maps, never directly addressing the different concepts behind these two approaches to map making. Answer 2 is also thin and incomplete.

READINGS
“The Value of C,” Jean Shepherd

“The Value of C” seems to be a “typically boy” story, which might be looked at against Belenky et al. The bravado of the boy’s bluff, which actually succeeds, could be analyzed along gender lines. (Women tend to say “I don’t know” more readily than men do.) You might also want to compare this piece with Joanne’s account in Chapter 2, “My Little Revolt.” Students will no doubt have stories of their own that will reveal similarly bold guerrilla tactics. In what ways do the persona’s responses seem more male than female?
Discussion questions (p. 303). In what ways does Shepherd avoid reading the question carefully and thinking out his answer? What kind of guerrilla tactics does he employ as alternative strategies?

Shepherd’s story shows two levels of avoidance: the persona’s avoidance in answering the teacher’s question and the writer’s “avoidance,” or pacing technique of stretching out the narrative at key moments to keep the reader in suspense. Whereas the boy employs guerrilla tactics, the writer also cleverly avoids delivering the punch line too soon. Throughout the narrative, we hear the repeated verse from the girls’ chorus—“Can you bake a cherry pie, charming Billy?”—the “pocking” of the tennis ball back and forth on the court, and the twittering of the birds. We further encounter avoidance with the digression of the boy’s attitude toward Sunday School miracles, which are now not just for old ladies but also for young boys called on to answer algebra questions.

Shepherd sets us up for the boy’s avoidance techniques in the first half of the essay with the descriptions of his successful avoidance of “being called on even once during the entire year, but it was a hollow victory and I knew it.” This avoidance continues, but it finally catches up with him, as the knot in his stomach anticipates. He is easily distracted: “A faint breeze drifted from the south, bringing with it hints of long summer afternoons to come, of swung bats, of nights in the lilac bushes.” Too soon, he looks to summer. In class, Shepherd notices other sights and sounds. He glances at the Christmas Pluto watch and with just two minutes to go makes his “fatal mistake”—“the mistake that all guerrilla fighters eventually make—I lost my concentration.” The “survival” on which he has spent years directing his energy is unspecified; he may be referring to academic survival through trying to concentrate on the lesson, which is unlikely given the personality profile of the young “guerrilla,” or the survival tactic of pretending to be attentive in class, which is more likely. The sun, the tennis ball pocking back and forth, the “steady drone of Pittinger’s voice,” the fact that there were only two minutes left proved too much for him: “A tiny mote of dust floated down through a slanting ray of sunshine. I watched it in its slow, undulating flight, like some microscopic silver bird.” And then—no doubt because he lets down his guard, too obviously not paying attention—Mr. Pittinger calls him to the board. The boy can no longer avoid the firing squad.

But, true guerrilla that he is, he continues practicing avoidance tactics, this time the avoidance of answering Mr. Pittinger’s question. He describes himself as “in a stupor of wrenching fear” clumping up the aisle, the object of humiliation. He now focuses his “concentration” onto the equation, noting the “mysterious crooked lines and fractions in parentheses, with miniature twos and threes hovering above
the whole thing like tiny barnacles. Xs and Ys were jumbled in crazy abandon.” And while studying this “first equation [he] had ever seen up close,” he also notices that “at the very end of this unholy mess was a tiny equal sign. And on the other side of the equal sign was a zero. Zero! All this crap adds up to nothing!” Shepherd glances at Pittinger, then at the class, biding his time, terrified of answering, but bravely retaining his stony guerrilla face.

Somewhere in his mind, he must have processed a discussion he had barely heard on the equation, or the idea of the “one in three- Trinity was too much for him because he blurts out an answer with guerrilla confidence: “‘C . . . is equal to three.’” He maintains the position of power, despite the fact that he simply guesses and has no idea how to find the correct answer. He continues to keep this power by responding to the amazed Pittinger that he got the answer through “empirical means,” co-opting his teacher’s phrase (another guerrilla tactic—“the old instincts”). Finally, the boy is out the door, “even before the echo of the bell had ceased,” true to “the guerrilla’s code” of “hit and run.”

“What Does a Woman Need to Know?” Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, Jill Mattuck Tarule

Students might respond to this essay by writing “What Does a Man Need to Know?” or by measuring their own responses to educational prompts by the gender differential Belenky and her colleagues set up. This essay will most likely elicit one of two responses from your students: dead silence, which actually indicates something profound is happening to them, or vehement denials from both male and female students. You might observe who speaks and who defers during this class discussion and see if this behavior falls along gender stereotypes, with male students speaking out in denial and women students saying very little or agreeing with the men. You may get lucky and find some spunky women in your class who get some interesting arguments going. Whatever happens, the other essays in the chapter might be read with Belenky as a backdrop, especially because the other two essays are stories about male responses to classroom pressure.

Discussion questions (p. 305). What important differences between the teachers and students in the two stories can you identify? How do the authors use this information to support the main point in their concluding paragraph?

Although both teachers use physical demonstrations of knowledge—a bottle of beans, a cube—they stress different aspects of knowing. The male science professor presents the class with a jar of dried beans, asks students to guess the number of beans contained in the jar (which only he knows), and warns students, “‘Never trust
the evidence of your senses.’” The female philosophy professor takes a different approach, telling students that although they cannot see all the sides of the cube at once, they know it is a cube “‘because you have intelligence. You invent the sides you cannot see.’” Both instructors examine the “limitations of firsthand experience as a source of knowledge,” but one creates a hierarchy of knowing, keeping the answer to himself, and the other creates a shared environment by pointing out that “we can’t look at all six sides of a cube at once. . . . You use your intelligence to create the ‘truth’ about cubes.” One instructor stresses what students cannot know from observation; the other stresses what they can know.

The first student panics and withdraws from the class: “Her sense of herself as a knower was shaky, and it was based on the belief that she could use her own firsthand experience as a source of truth. The man was saying that this belief was fallacious.” The second student, because she is told “she is capable of intelligent thought,” runs to her dorm, calls her boyfriend, and reports that she feels “grown-up” or empowered from being told that she has intelligence.

Both responses are used as archetypes to support the main point of the concluding paragraph: “A woman, like any other human being, does need to know that the mind makes mistakes; but our interviews have convinced us that every woman, regardless of age, social class, ethnicity, and academic achievement, needs to know that she is capable of intelligent thought, and she needs to know it right away.” Two examples are not usually enough to support such strong assertions that women in particular need to be coaxed into recognizing their intelligence, although within the structure of this essay, the examples appear to be representative. The authors link the first student to “most of the women in our sample” in her lack of confidence in thinking. The second student illustrates what happens when women are told they are intelligent. The authors refer to “many of the women we interviewed,” thereby indicating that other stories also corroborate their findings.

“In Laboratory with Agassiz,” Samuel H. Scudder

Although Scudder is left pretty much alone to study the fish, Agassiz does offer encouragement to the novice naturalist. You might spend some time examining this encouragement in the light of what Belenky says about women and knowledge. Does Scudder fit a “typical male” model? Does Agassiz mirror the style of the male science professor of Belenky’s essay, or is he more like the female philosophy professor? Or perhaps he embodies a little of both?
Discussion questions (p. 307). What does Scudder learn by following Agassiz’s injunction to “look, look, look”? What would Agassiz consider a complete answer to his examination?

On the surface, Scudder learns several practical, “textbooky” things about natural history: proper care of specimens, the specific structure of the haemulon (teeth, scales, pores of the head, symmetricality), the arrangement of the structure within the larger family of the specimen. More importantly, however, Agassiz’s injunction teaches Scudder the self-reliance and confidence necessary to all academic inquiry. He learns method; he learns the importance of relationships, both collegial and contextual; he learns respect for the field and the specimens he studies; he learns “not to be content” with his observations. He learns to stretch himself.

When first given the fish, Scudder reports that “in ten minutes I had seen all that could be seen in that fish.” Four days later, he is still looking at the fish and still finding information worth recording in his notebook. Eight months later, he leaves Agassiz’s lab “with reluctance” to go on to study insects but takes with him a strategy for scientific investigation. Agassiz’s training has prepared the new scientist to take on whatever new investigations present themselves.

You might ask what expectations Agassiz would have for students to “look, look, look” at the structure of Scudder’s essay: the impact of its rhetorical plan, sentence structure, diction, tone, and style on its purpose and intended audience. In addition, he might ask students to read the essay in the context of the other “specimens” of Chapter 12: Belenky et al.’s essay, which comments on the nature of acquiring knowledge, and Shepherd’s humorous essay, which depicts a more traditional, predictable approach to classroom practices. The essays can open an ongoing conversation on the meaning of “learning” and “knowledge.”

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Narrate: Students might write their narratives against the theory of Belenky, particularly if they have observed themselves responding in what appear to be “typically male” or “typically female” ways. They might want to prove or disprove the idea that women in particular must know immediately that they are “capable of intelligent thought.” Other students might be more interested in tone and therefore might concentrate on creating a humorous essay, such as Shepherd’s essay, “The Value of C,” or Thurber’s essay, “The Microscope” (Chapter 9). Still others might approach the narrative as Scudder does.

2. Observe: Students might want to observe roommates or friends in various majors to discover what similar and different approaches are used by
engineering and liberal arts majors, for example. Does the nature of the subject require different approaches? The idea of purpose, which they have become accustomed to thinking about as they have planned and written essays, is also applicable to the issue of examinations: How differently do teachers and students view the examination process? How differently does subject matter dictate the type of examination? In what ways could students envision written examinations for subjects in which they have come to expect short-answer or true-false questions, such as biology, math, physics, and engineering? As they plan and write their essays, they might interview the librarian, nurse, or counselor who is on duty the night before the exam and who sees test anxiety at its highest point.

3. Investigate: Most students never realize that all teachers were once students and therefore experienced the stress of midterm and final examinations. Asking students to speak with teachers about test taking involves students in a collaboration and helps them see that taking examinations successfully is a matter of strategy, not a matter of simply “being smart” and mysteriously getting the right answer. Students can also begin to learn how examination questions are constructed, much as essays are written, for specific audiences and purposes. Most importantly, they recognize that they can acquire control over how well they perform under examination conditions by taking the time to analyze the assumptions and expectations of the questions. The assignment offers a certain sense of “undercover” investigation, which may appeal to students who tend to think in terms of “them” (teachers with answers) and “us” (students without the answers). They will gladly share with other students the secrets they have discovered about succeeding in Professor X’s class.

4. Collaborate: It may be particularly productive for students to compose the study guide for subjects they do not like, have not succeeded in, or are simply afraid to take. This will help them examine writing strategies for difficult subjects, which they probably avoid or for which they prepare inadequately. They could also study their own habits and compare them to others in their group. You might want to help students break down the habits, strategies, and approaches according to time spent and task required for reading and rereading, note taking and journal keeping, and seeking additional assistance from other students, the Writing Center, or instructors.

5. Read: The Writing Center or Academic Assistance Center on your campus may have a reading specialist whom students can interview. Alternatively,
students might interview the directors of the various specialized centers (writing, math). Students might want to use this assignment to conduct introductory research on learning disabilities, linguistics and language processing, or teaching methodologies in specific fields of study. Students might want to examine the notion of gender and learning styles, which Belenky et al. introduce in their essay. This assignment could be especially beneficial to students who have difficulty writing essay examinations.

6. Respond: Jean Shepherd’s “The Value of C” will strike a deep chord in your students, most of whom will readily identify with the rascal-persona of the narrative. The assignment might be sequenced with any of the previous assignments to help students not only cite their own narratives but also provide insight into how and why they found themselves in the embarrassing situation of being unprepared. Encouraging students to be honest about their academic failures can produce some fine writing and perhaps some important self-realizations. Students might also use this assignment to practice tone and control the build-up of tension through the use of rhetorical repetitions and narrative observations (the refrainlike recurrence of the girls’ chorus, the tennis balls).

7. Analyze: The male professor is presented as an authority with answers, confident in his ability to know and pass on knowledge to others. The female students are depicted as diffident, one responding to a threat by running (withdrawing from class) and the other responding positively to encouragement. The female philosophy professor is further stereotyped by her nurturing approach, assuring students that they already possess knowledge. She is also stereotyped by her concern with connectiveness, employing the inclusive pronoun we when speaking about seeing the cube, then switching to the “you” pronoun to offer encouragement to the students. Students might want to read more extended excerpts from Belenky’s book, Women’s Ways of Knowing, and research other current studies on the topic of knowledge and gender, such as Carol Gilligan’s In a Different Voice and Deborah Tannen’s You Just Don’t Understand. Some students might be interested in expanding this study or incorporating previous research in gender and language from Chapter 9. The benefit of this assignment is the degree to which students can become aware of gender differences in and out of the classroom, which may be a help to them as they learn the art of academic inquiry. Their own responses to authority and power are a good place for them to start in
examining the meanings of “maleness” and “femaleness.” In what ways do they observe both maleness and femaleness within themselves?

8. Evaluate: Agassiz’s instructions to Scudder were minimal: “Take this fish . . . and look at it; we call it a haemulon; by and by I will ask what you have seen.” Later, Scudder was told to “look again, look again.” The implications are that Scudder had the ability to map out a strategy for seeing and was capable of seeing something significant. Agassiz obviously believed that what students discovered on their own made a deeper impression than what was delivered through lectures or other secondhand methods. With little external scaffolding for the learning process, Scudder was face-to-face with the fish, forced to “look, look, look” and report his findings. He learned more than the structure of the fish; he learned self-reliance. The process itself of learning to look outweighs the answer, which Agassiz could have simply given at the onset. Most students will view the “good teacher” as the one with specific answers and direction. There is a definite parallel between Agassiz’s method for teaching scientific inquiry and current writing pedagogy. Students learn to write by writing and by receiving facilitative responses to their drafts rather than directives. Many students are frustrated by this, until, like Scudder, they “see” the structure of their own work.

9. Argue: More and more universities are encouraging their students to purchase laptop computers to conduct research, take class notes, and write essay examinations. Some universities assign classes to computer classrooms for examinations. The web sites for a university or a particular department may have interesting policies and procedures for such examinations. Consider the pros and cons of requiring all students to purchase and use a laptop for exams. Then organize a letter to the chair of your department recommending that (1) all students be required to use laptops or (2) all students should be given writing options when taking an examination.

10. Argue: The assignment presupposes that by this point in the term students have learned that the production of good writing takes time. By definition, however, time is not available under examination conditions. Teachers who understand the recursive nature of writing, then, should not give written examinations. The assignment provides a good chance for students to review what they have learned about the writing process. You can play the devil’s advocate for this assignment and insist that timed examinations are important in helping to strengthen students’ ability to write under pressure. Given what
students have learned from previous investigation into methods of examination giving, they might continue to work in groups to construct alternatives to the current system of written examinations: two-day exams in which students plan, draft, and prepare answers the first day and write a final draft the second day; more choice of questions to allow students to write on questions they feel they can answer successfully; less weight attached to midterm and final examinations; more frequent, in-class mini-examinations throughout the term.

USING THE WRITING CENTER

Tutors can help students develop confidence in answering essay examinations by encouraging them to read and analyze questions and practice strategies for constructing answers. Many students feel nervous when asked to write under stress, and understandably so. Tutors can begin by giving students short questions and timing students as they write. At each session, the length of time can be expanded to replicate classroom conditions, and the questions can be progressively more difficult. Such practice under the care of a trained tutor can help build the confidence necessary to perform successfully under actual examination conditions.

Encourage your students to use the Writing Center if they need extra practice in taking essay examinations. Students might want to take a sample question or a course textbook with them to discuss with a tutor. Together the tutor and the student writer can plan practice sessions that will help the student operate successfully under the demands of an actual exam. Let your students know that the Writing Center is the place for them to talk about all their writing issues, including how to write answers for exams.

SOME ADVICE FOR NEW INSTRUCTORS WHO ARE WRITING ESSAY QUESTIONS

- Essay questions ordinarily test substance rather than style because style is usually the product of revision. In other classes, students will be asked to write on topics they have been trying to master for weeks and have been studying with ferocious concentration for a few days. The great trick is to bring that knowledge to bear, as the T. H. White quote at the beginning of Chapter 11 notes, to “answer hard, with minimum verbiage; and do it all against a speeding clock.” In addition, students need to understand the goal of the exam. Is it, for example, to test their understanding of particular concepts, which means that good answers must show particular facts? Or is it to construct and
support an argument? You must read the exams with the goal in mind. Such issues as style should be considered only when the style is outstanding and can be counted positively.

• Consider your test format carefully. Will you ask students to choose from among several questions and spend the entire time answering one question? Or will you offer four questions and ask students to answer three out of the four? Again, it is advisable to let students know what to expect so that normally well-prepared students aren’t caught off guard. Some instructors announce the exam questions ahead of time; others toss out questions during class discussions and then include only one of the preannounced questions on the exam as a way to make the exam more rigorous.

• Word your question carefully. A half hour spent drafting the question, chasing down colleagues to critique it, and redrafting if necessary can help ensure that students understand what you are asking on the day of the exam. If you are trying to test your students’ understanding of the techniques of persuasion in Belenky et al.’s “What Does a Woman Need to Know?” frame the question broadly to encourage students to employ various methods of development: “Show how Belenky’s essay employs the means of persuasion discussed in Chapter 6” (rather than “Why is the essay persuasive?”). If you know what arrangement the essay should follow (because you are testing how well students can write an extended definition, for example), make sure the question clearly states the directive.

• Before the exam, sit down and time yourself to see if you can answer the question adequately under exam conditions.

• Consider your proctoring duties and keep them inconspicuous. If you give out the questions in advance and allow students to use books and notes, you may want to specify what kind of notes students may use and collect the notes as well as the exams to avoid situations in which students write the exam ahead of time. It is also advisable to remind students of the time throughout the exam. Before the exam begins, announce that all exams must be turned in promptly at the end of the hour; throughout the exam, you might want to write the time on the blackboard every fifteen or thirty minutes if there is no clock in the room. Toward the end of the hour, students may need several five-minute reminders.

• Before grading any exams, read through the entire pile quickly and sort out strong answers from weak answers. The tendency is to begin with unrealistically high standards and in effect penalize students whose papers are at the top of the stack.
ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS FOR THE COLLABORATIVE CLASSROOM

Any of the questions and writing assignments lend themselves to collaborative activities. In addition, the following suggestion may be used:

- Ask students to work in groups to write what they consider a good essay examination question based on the readings in the book. After students have composed a question that meets their criteria of fairness, have each group present the question to the rest of the class, along with a description of how the group agreed on the reading selection and wrote the question. From the various examination questions, the class might choose two or three that they think are good questions to use for a practice, or an actual, examination.

SOURCES AND ADDITIONAL REFERENCES
