

Reading and Responding to Essay Questions

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If multiple-choice questions are the most popular exam question, essay questions are probably the most feared. Not only do they require a good deal of preparation on the test taker's part, but they also require a close reading. Yet unfortunately, many anxious students skim the essay question itself and plunge right into writing what they think is the correct answer. All too often, they end up answering a question that wasn't asked. To do well on essay exams, test takers need to do the kind of close and careful reading described in the pages that follow.

Identifying the Topic and the Requirements

Your goal in analyzing an essay question is to discover the two essential elements of every essay question: the topic and the requirement or requirements. The topic of an essay question is the specific subject you need to discuss. The requirements tell you how to approach or handle the topic.

Define the Topic

Look at the following essay question. As you read it, ask yourself "What word or phrase most effectively sums up the topic?"

On occasion, Mark Twain's novel *Huckleberry Finn* has been criticized for its supposed racism. Yet according to Twain expert Mark Fischer, Twain's novel is actually an attack on the institution of slavery, and the true hero of the novel is not Huck, but Jim. Begin your essay by summarizing Professor Fischer's argument. Then explain why you do or do not agree with it. Be sure to use evidence from the text to argue your position.

What is the topic of the question?

1. Mark Twain's novel *Huckleberry Finn*
2. Mark Fischer's view of *Huckleberry Finn*
3. racism in the work of Mark Twain?

If you chose topic 2, you're absolutely right. The sample essay question does not ask for a general discussion of the novel—its setting, characters, and themes. Nor does it ask you to go beyond *Huckleberry Finn* and look for evidence of racism in Twain's other works. The topic of the question is narrower than that. It focuses on Mark Fischer's defense of *Huckleberry Finn*. Your answer to the question should do the same.

Understanding the Requirements

Every essay question has one or more requirements, or necessary tasks, that your answer must fulfill. Let's look again at that sample essay question about Mark Twain. How many requirements does it have? In other words, how many tasks must you complete in your answer to get full credit: one, two, or three?

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This essay question has three requirements:

1. summarize Professor Fischer's position
2. explain why you agree or disagree
3. use evidence from the text

If you failed to do any one of these, your exam score would suffer. That's why reading closely to determine all the requirements of an essay question is so important.

Key Words Help Identify Requirements

To determine exactly how many requirements you need to fulfill, pay close attention to words like who, where, why, when, which, and how. They frequently introduce a specific requirement of an essay question, often one that asks you to recall an important fact before you express an opinion or take a stand.

However, you should also familiarize yourself with the words listed below. Words like argue, describe, and summarize frequently introduce the individual requirements in an essay question.

Analyze: Divide or break a large whole into parts and comment on one or more of the parts, showing how it relates to the whole or reveals an underlying meaning.

Example: Analyze the following excerpt from James Madison's Federalist Papers and show how it reveals his bias in favor of states' rights.

Apply: Show how a principle or theory is illustrated in a particular instance or process.

Example: Apply the Doppler effect to the behavior of light and sound waves.

Argue: Express a definite point of view and make it convincing through specific reasons, illustrations, and studies.

Example: Argue the positive or negative effect of the Miranda decision on the American legal system.

Compare and Contrast: Describe how two topics are both similar and different.

Note: Some essay questions may use only the word compare, but that almost always means point out similarities and differences if both exist.

Example: Compare and contrast the leadership roles played by Grant and Lee during the Civil War.

Criticize: Explain the positive and negative effects of a particular decision, argument, or stand.

Note: Sometimes instructors use the word criticize to ask for a summation of negative effects. If the meaning is not clear from the context, clarify it with your instructor.

Example: Criticize the current regulations governing the use of pesticides in agriculture.

Define: Give a full and complete meaning, preferably one that includes an example or two, and some history of how the term came into being.

Example: Define “Manifest Destiny” and explain its effect on the American West.

Describe: Tell how something looks or happens: supply specific details.

Example: Describe how Benjamin Franklin came to develop his theory of positive and negative charges.

Discuss: Give the details of a situation, stand, or decision. Then explain the consequences.

Example: Discuss the role of California governor Earl Warren in the government’s decision to intern Japanese-Americans during World War II.

Evaluate: Explain the pros and cons of a situation or point of view and take a stand based on your evaluation.

Example: Evaluate Richard Nixon’s role in the shaping of U.S. policy toward China.

Illustrate: Give examples that clarify a point or show how something works.

Example: Illustrate the different ways in which lasers have revolutionized the treatment of heart disease.

Interpret: Explain the meaning of a statement and give examples.

Example: Interpret Edward L. Bernay’s claim that “propaganda is only another word for education.”

Show: Give examples.

Note: “Show” is usually used in combination with one of the other words listed here.

Example: Trace the highlights of Lenny Bruce’s career and show how he affected the next generation of American comedians.

Summarize: Cover the most essential points of a theory, discovery, or event.

Example: Summarize the results of the Kefauver hearings on organized crime.

Trace: Step by step, explain how something happened (or happens) over a period of time.

Example: Trace the chain of events that led to the Clean Air and Water Act.

What If the Question is Not a Question?

In the best of all possible worlds, essay requirements would always be neatly and clearly stated, as they are in the following example.

Define the term “republicanism”^{*} and explain why the framers of the Constitution chose it over “direct democracy.”

The question asks you to do two things:

1. define the term “republicanism”
2. explain why the framers of the Constitution chose republicanism over “direct democracy.”

For this essay question, the requirements are pretty clear-cut. But what about the next question: Does it also neatly spell out its requirements?

Compare the use of participant and nonparticipant observation in sociological research.

This kind of vaguely formulated essay question really benefits from a slow, word-for-word reading that teases out its hidden questions:

1. What do the terms participant and nonparticipant observation mean?
2. In what ways are they different or similar?

If an essay question is vague, don’t just answer it without analysis and hope for the best. Instead, do a close reading to infer the question or questions implied.

^{*} republicanism: form of government in which decisions are made by elected officials.