A Guide On How To:

Take a Short Answer or Essay Test

- Strategies for Taking Tests
- Prepare for Future Tests
Taking Tests That Are: Short Answer or Essay

Short answer and essay tests can be the final section of a bigger test, or a test by itself. While both ask that you take the basic knowledge of a topic and state the key ideas in your own words, a short answer question may require a few sentences, whereas an essay prompt may require a paragraph or more.

What are some strategies for taking a short answer or essay test?

Use your Time

- **Preview** the test and answer the questions you **know first**.
  - See if anything you used for one question might **help** on a different question.

- Read the **directions** carefully.
  - Check for **length requirements** or guidelines for formatting your answer (paragraph, bulleted list, etc.)

- Count the number of questions you have, and divide that number by the amount of time you have to give yourself a **time limit** for each question.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test Time</th>
<th>Number of Questions</th>
<th>Time Per Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>60 minutes</td>
<td>10 Short Answer Questions</td>
<td>6 minutes per question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90 minutes</td>
<td>3 Essay Questions</td>
<td>30 minutes per question</td>
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- **Plan out** your answer first by writing your thoughts in the **margins** of your test.

- **Attempt every question**.

Use The Test

- Use **terminology** used in the test in your answer to make it specific and complete.

- Look for **familiar terms** that you used in your study outline.

- If you are given prompt options, choose the prompt you are **most familiar** with.
Use The Prompt

- Highlight or underline the **key words** in the directions. This will help you focus on appropriate details to support your answer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Word</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discuss, Define, Describe</td>
<td>Characteristics or important features</td>
<td><em>Describe a hybrid car.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illustrate, Explain, Summarize</td>
<td>Use examples that help demonstrate the specific topic</td>
<td><em>Explain the uses of a hybrid car.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compare/Contrast, Examine</td>
<td>Use details, facts, or examples to show how items are the same or different, or unique</td>
<td><em>Examine the advantages of a hybrid car.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Separate out the key word, topic, and limiting word in the prompt. The prompt is made up of three valuable pieces: the **topic**, a **key word**, and a **limiting word**. These three pieces will tell you what to write about, how to organize your answers, and what specifically you should include.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example Prompt</th>
<th>Key Word</th>
<th>Limiting Word</th>
<th>Topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>List four engine bearing properties.</em></td>
<td>List</td>
<td>Four</td>
<td>Engine bearing properties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>What is the difference between deglazing and honing a cylinder?</em></td>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>Deglazing and honing</td>
<td>Cylinders</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Your prompt should act as a starter for your thesis statement. If the prompt is in the form of a question, **restate the question in your answer**. Doing so will ensure that your response answers the prompt specifically, and leaves you free to recall good supporting details.

| Example Prompt: What is Pascal’s Law? | Sample Thesis Statement: Pascal’s Law is… |
What can I do to prepare for a future short answer or essay test?

- **Ask your instructor** about the test.
  - What specifically will it cover?
  - How much of your total grade is the test?
- Use your notes to create a self-test.
  - Use **key words** from your notes and textbook chapters in your answers. Look for words that are **repeated** throughout your notes, or are **bolded vocabulary terms** in your textbook.
  - Look for 3-4 details you could include in your answer, and then write a rough outline of an answer those questions.
    - **Study your outline** and you’ll have the organization and support already laid out.
    - Plan to rewrite the outline in the margin of your test, and use it to write your answer.
- After the test, review your notes and text and **mark** the items that were on the test. These are items to review in your preparation for a **mid-term** or final exam.

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**References**


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