

# The **WRITING** CENTER

**Elftmann Student  
Success Center**

**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.

Test Time	Number of Questions	Time Per Question
60 minutes	10 Short Answer Questions	6 minutes per question
90 minutes	3 Essay Questions	30 minutes per question

- **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.

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

- 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.

Example Prompt	Key Word	Limiting Word	Topic
<i>List four engine bearing properties.</i>	List	Four	Engine bearing properties
<i>What is the difference between deglazing and honing a cylinder?</i>	Difference	Deglazing and honing	Cylinders

- 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.

<b>Example Prompt:</b> <i>What is Pascal's Law?</i>	<b>Sample Thesis Statement:</b> <i>Pascal's Law is...</i>
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## 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.

## References

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