

Constructing Essay Exams

What happens: Learner

- Hears and reads instructions
- Interprets the question
- Recalls relevant information
- Prepares a response according to the verbal directive, either mentally or written, either outlined or "mapped",
- Writes response
- Reviews and edits if time permits

Essay tests can evaluate more complex cognitive or thinking skills

assuming that rote memory and recall tasks are assessed more appropriately through objective tests as true-false and multiple choice questions. These cognitive challenges are reflected in the verbs of the questions themselves, from simple to complex (c.f. lists of verbs in objects...)

1. **Knowledge:** recall, define, arrange, list, label, identify, match, reproduce
2. **Comprehension:** describe, explain, recognize, restate, review, translate, classify; give examples; (re)state in own words
3. **Application:** apply, illustrate, interpret, operate, solve, predict, utilize
4. **Analysis:** analyze, compare, contrast, distinguish, examine, experiment, diagram; outline
5. **Synthesis:** design, develop, formulate, propose, construct, create, reorganize, integrate, model, incorporate, plan
6. **Evaluation:** evaluate, argue, assess, compare, contrast, conclude, defend, judge, support, interpret, justify

(for a complete listing of verbs in these categories, see [Essay terms and directives](#))

Advantages:

- **Require students to demonstrate critical thinking**
in organizing and producing an answer beyond rote recall and memory
- **Empower students to demonstrate their knowledge**
within broad limits beyond the restraint of objective tests (true false, multiple choice)
- **Allows learners to demonstrate originality and creativity**
- **Reduces preparation time in developing,**
as well as distributing, a test, especially for small number of students
- **Presents more possibilities for diagnosis**

Disadvantages:

- **Grading is often subjective and not consistent, colored by**
preconceptions of student, prior performance, time of day, neatness and handwriting, spelling and grammar, and where the actual test falls in
- **Can be a limited sampling of content**
- **Good writing requires time to think,**
organize, write and revise
- **Time consuming to correct**
- **Advantageous for students with good writing and verbal skills**
as opposed to those who have alternative learning styles (visual and kinesthetic)
- **Essay questions are not always properly developed**
to assess higher thinking skills (often only test for recall and style)
- **Advantageous for students who are quick,**
as opposed to those who take time to develop an argument or may suffer from writers block

Mechanics:

- **Clearly state questions**
not only to make essay tests easier for students to answer,

but also to make the responses easier to evaluate

- **Include a relatively larger number of questions** requiring shorter answers in order to cover more content
- **Guard against having too many test items** for the time allowed
- **Indicate an appropriate response length** for each question
- **Set time limits if necessary**
- **Note graded weights to questions**

Ideal test items:

- **Integrate course objectives into the essay items**
- **Specify and define what mental process you want the students to perform** (e.g., analyze, synthesize, compare, contrast, etc.). Does not assume learner is practiced with the process
- **Start questions with an active verb** such as "compare", "contrast", "explain why"; Offer definitions of the active verb, and even practice beforehand.
- **Avoid writing essay questions that require factual knowledge,** as those beginning questions with interrogative pronouns (who, when, why, where)
- **Avoid vague, ambiguous, or non-specific verbs** (consider, examine, discuss, explain) unless you include specific instructions in developing responses
- **Have each student answer all the questions** Do not offer options for questions
- **Structure the question to minimize subjective interpretations**

Directions:

- **Present the assignment both verbally and in writing.** The initial oral plus written presentation to promote and inspire thought; written for reference within the test
- **Provide evaluation criteria**
- **Focus on the mental activity to avoid rote answers,** and/or repeating examples from the text
- **Teach students how to write an essay (test)** explaining definitions of cognitive verbs
- **Teach the difference** between presenting a position as opposed to presenting an opinion
- **Define requirements clearly** State the number of points each question is worth
- **Warn students of possible pitfalls** especially if you have strong ideas of what you do and do not want
- **Inform the students about how you evaluate** misspelled words, neatness, handwriting, grammar, irrelevant material (bluffing)


Correcting:

- **Develop a model answer** that contains all necessary points
- **Note additional content for extra points**
- **Conceal or ignore students' names in the correcting process**
- **Read through the answers to one test item at a time** without interruption
- **Sequence best through worst responses** for verification if time permits
- **Write comments on the students' answers,** both affirming and correcting
- **Do not give credit for irrelevant material**
- **Mix or shuffle papers to vary subject's location** before assessing the next test item

Curricular guides and resources:

Using feedback in the classroom | Teaching critical thinking | Bloom's taxonomy |
Teaching with questioning | Preparing guided notes |
A curricular idea! | Curricular resources and guides |
Learning Exercises & Games | Exploring learning styles |
Constructing true/false tests | Constructing multiple choice tests |
Constructing essay exams | Cross language resources including digital translators |
Online Learning/eLearning books and resources for teachers

StumbleUpon

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