

Essay Test Tips

1. **Survey the landscape.** When you first get the test, look over the whole thing. Figure out what *exactly* you are supposed to do. Read the prompt very carefully and make sure you understand everything it is asking you. You'd be amazed at how many students make a mistake about the basic instructions.
2. **Simple outline.** Don't spend a lot of time outlining your essay. Outline very basically, with only a few words to represent each fact or point you want to make.
3. **The 3 Minute Rule.** After outlining, stop and think before you write your essay. This will give your brain time to go over the outline and make sure you are answering the prompt and will also give it time to come up with any more details to add to your outline.
4. **Don't survey.** If you're asked a specific question, answer that specific question. Don't dump everything you know about a topic into your response. No matter how nervous you are, you need to attend to what's being asked. Teachers craft their essay questions carefully, so if you compare when you were asked to contrast, or list reasons but don't assess or explain them, it will be noticed when the grading rolls around.
5. **Don't spend long on the introduction.** Essay exams are not the time to give lengthy introductions or "setups" to the topic. Usually the time is budgeted tightly, and there's not time for this. Begin your answer in the very first sentence. Nailing the main point down right up front puts your essay on track for an A. Give a basic summary of the points you want to make.
6. **Don't gesture.** Some students think the answer is so obvious—and the teacher knows it, after all—that they only need to wave their hands at the answer (rather than wasting all that ink to spell it out). But the teacher is looking for you to demonstrate your knowledge and understanding of the material, which can only be done if you take the time to make explicit your points. Be sure your answers can be understood by a reasonably intelligent person, not one who is previously familiar with the material (like the teacher).
7. **Write quickly and neatly.** More detail equals a better grade (usually). Legible handwriting equals a better grade (usually).
8. **Keep it real.** Answer in simple, clear language. Avoid fillers, slang, and non-academic language, and eliminate irrelevant material. When an instructor is reading 70 essays on the same topic, information not related to the topic really stands out like a sore thumb. Some graders just ignore it, but others take off points for it.
9. **Don't be afraid to go back.** It's OK to go back to fill in some important point you just thought of. Just draw an arrow to the margin or to the top of the paper and add in your latest brainstorm. In many cases, these later additions tip the scales from a B to an A. Also, it is okay to cross out a couple of words here or there. This is not a polished essay, and the teacher understands that, but an effort at editing is always appreciated.
10. **Watch the clock.** It is always a good idea to have your own watch so you can keep track of the time you have available. Phones are not acceptable as a clock. If you find yourself running out of time on a question, at least sketch out how you would answer the part you've left out. Usually you will get at least some credit for this and won't have to take the full hit for material left unanswered.

Sources:

<http://www.usnews.com/education/blogs/professors-guide/2009/11/18/top-10-tips-for-taking-essay-tests>;
<http://calnewport.com/blog/2008/12/08/how-to-ace-essay-questions-using-the-three-minute-rule/>