

Introduction

Exam questions differ depending on what the lecturer is trying to assess. Generally, exams are taken to assess knowledge and skills, to test the application of knowledge and skills, and to test students' ability to argue, analyse, synthesis and utilise information.

Essay type questions are some of the many forms assessment tools that lecturers use to test various aspects of students' learning. This section will help you understand what essay type questions entail, as well as provide you with some tips on how to tackle them.

What are essay type questions?

Essay type questions are examination questions that require a structured answer from a student, using their own words to articulate their understanding of specific subject matters or topics.

To answer an essay question effectively, you need to determine the purpose of the question. That is, you must first figure out **what the question is about** and **what it is asking you to do**.

For example, does the question require factual recall of information; does it require you to do an analysis of a topic or do a synthesis of previously learned principles? Does it require you to give an opinion on a topic or statement?

Once you determine the purpose of the essay question and understand the task, that is, what you are required of you to do, answering the question becomes easier. Essay questions often have **verbs or cues** (task words) embedded in them and understanding what these cues or task words indicate is important because that will help ensure that you answer the question in the specified manner.

For example, if you are given a factual recall essay question, the verbs or cues in the question will require you to do one or any combination of the following: *Name, List, Summarise or Outline*. If these cues or verbs are present in a question, remember that you need to restate or summarise information from your notes, using your own words.

An essay type question that requires you to do an analysis or explain relationships will have verbs or cues such as *Explain or Discuss*. This type of question requires you to explain or provide details based on your readings on a specific topic or subject, or details based on the information you gathered about the topic during lectures.

Tips on how to answer essay type questions

1. Read the question very carefully, at least two or three times.
2. Circle the main verb in the question to understand what is being asked of you – that is, what you are required to do. Are you required to explain, discuss, name or analyse, or are you required to do a combination of any of these?
3. Circle all the key words in the question.
4. Write an outline of all the points you want to mention in your answer. One effective way of doing this is to do a quick mind-map.
5. Select the relevant ideas and organise them logically. Use this to guide your writing.

6. Answer the questions using the rules and conventions of academic writing for essays. In other words, your essay should have an introduction, body and conclusion. It should be well structured, logical, coherent and cohesive.
7. Go through your essay again to check if all the main ideas have been included.
8. Check for any spelling or grammar errors before submitting or moving on to the next question.

Additional Resources

http://academics.smcvt.edu/cbauer-ramazani/IEP/acad_skills/essay_questions.htm

Summary

Essay type questions are not as complicated as they may appear to be if you have a clear understanding of the question type and the purpose of specific questions. Looking for verbs (task words) or cues, in an essay question makes it easy to understand what you are required to do and how to proceed with your answer. Use the tips provided to practise before the exams. Particularly, practise doing an outline before writing. This will help you to be better prepared to writing your essays during exams. Remember, the essay type questions often require you to show your understanding of relevant subjects or modules, using your own words, and in some instances, having an opinion on the topic, which makes it fun to do.

References

Van Schoor, A: Mill, E & Van der Merwe, D. 1995. *Effective Study*. Pretoria: University of South Africa.