



Douglas College

Douglas College Learning Centre

ESSAY-EXAM-TAKING STRATEGY

Essay exams can seem daunting; the questions can make you panic. Suggested below are some steps you can take to make essay exam questions less scary.

Step One: How can I make the question less scary?

Circle or **underline several of the key words** or phrases in the question.

- This helps you simplify the question by getting rid of some of the distracting and scary sentences that make the question seem longer and more complex than it probably really is.
- Key words to mark include:
 - the words which give instructions about what to do (for example, *describe, explain, analyze, compare, discuss*)
 - the key terms used (for example, *factor, principle, reason, issue*, and other important vocabulary words that are part of the course itself)

Step Two: How can I decide what to write?

Make a quick list of your ideas

- You can use the back of the test page, the top of the paper, the margin. Jot down the key ideas that you think could go into an essay.
- Making this list helps you do several things. First, it helps you on paper, you don't have to work so hard to remember it anymore. It's like making a grocery list before you go shopping, which helps you remember what you went to the store for. Second, it helps you organize your thoughts so you can decide on a logical order for the ideas. After you start writing, you can always change the order again, or even add to the list as more ideas come to mind because the act of writing itself helps stimulate your mind to come up with more ideas. In fact, you will probably forget good ideas that pop into your mind as you are writing unless you quickly add them to your list. So a quick list helps you get started, helps you keep those ideas coming, and helps you keep from forgetting what you have to say.

Step Three: How can I start my answer?

Start writing by **making your first sentence a restatement of the question.**

This helps you get started without having to think too hard about how to start your answer. It also gets your pen moving without too much effort, which often is all you need to get going, and to get ideas started. Look at the example below:

Question: ***What are some of the positives and some of the negatives experienced by commuters who make the switch from driving a car to using public transit?***

Possible First Sentence for an answer: ***Commuters experience both positive and negative outcomes when they switch from driving to using public transit.***

Step Four: What if I can't think of enough to write about?

If you're having trouble thinking about what to write, try to follow this 4 step pattern:

- 1) Make a general statement or point.
One benefit of switching to public transit is time to relax while leaving the stress of driving to the bus driver.
- 2) Explain the statement in more words, with specific details, or give some background context.
Driving during rush hour causes a great deal of stress as the driver tries to feed into congested roads, think ahead about how and when to get into a different lane to be ready for the next turn while listening to the traffic report to hear which bridge to avoid today.
- 3) Provide evidence –specific details, examples, or expert opinion (quotations) as evidence of your point.
Many commuters on trains or buses can be observed catching up on their reading, doing crosswords, reading newspapers, chatting with friends. On the other hand, drivers in rush hour tend to be alone, one to each car, with foot on brake or accelerator, hands on steering wheel, waiting impatiently for a light to change or the car in front to move more quickly.
- 4) Explain your evidence – show how your example or evidence demonstrates the point you started with.
Riding on buses or trains provides opportunities to relax whereas driving a car in rush hour requires concentration, attention to details of navigating, and readiness to respond quickly, all of which are hardly relaxing.