



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 the benefits and risks of expanding highways in an urban setting?***

First Sentence for an answer: ***“Expanding highways in cities includes both benefits and risks.”***

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 pattern:

- 1) Make a general statement or point. Look at the examples below:
One benefit of more highways is less pollution from traffic jams.
- 2) Explain the statement in more words, with specific details, or give some background context.
When highways are expanded, or new highways are built, cars will spend less time idling and moving slowly through traffic jams.
- 3) Provide evidence – expert opinion (quotations), specific details, or examples as evidence of your point.
For example, when a new lane was built on the Port Mann bridge in 1999, the air quality around the west end of the bridge improved dramatically.
- 4) Explain your evidence – show how your example or evidence demonstrates the point you started with.
More and improved highways can have this effect of leading to improved fuel consumption and better air quality.
- 5) Move on to a new general point, and follow the same steps again (make a statement, provide context, give evidence, explain your evidence).

To help you remember these steps, think of the acronym SEEE:*

- S:** Statement (quick statement of a general point)
- E:** Expansion of the general statement (define it, reword it, give context)
- E:** Evidence (details, examples)
- E:** Explanation of the evidence (explain how the evidence proves your point)