Test Taking Strategies

Essay Questions

1. Budget your exam TIME—
   - Take a quick analysis of how many questions you have to answer, and how much time you have to answer each one. This should include time to review your answers before turning in the exam for punctuation, grammar, structure, and thoroughness.
   - Note the point-value of each question. You will most likely dedicate more time answering the questions that are worth more points.
   - Maximize your opportunity to gain points by answering the essay questions you know well first.

2. Develop a brief OUTLINE of your answer before you begin to write—
   - A brief outline will help you organize your essay, ensure you answer all parts of the question, and help you to stay focused on the main ideas.
   - Include a brief thesis statement (a sentence which introduces the main ideas you will address in your essay).
   - Write 3-5 sentences in support of the main ideas (provide evidence from the readings, lectures, your notes, etc.).

3. Be CONCISE, Answer the Question—
   - Read the question completely and make sure to answer all its parts. A well written essay that does not answer the question is of little use to the instructor.
   - Get to the point! Avoid rambling and providing details irrelevant to the question asked.

4. Know the KEY WORDS in essay questions—
   - Knowing the key words in an essay question, will help you organize a well written essay. You will find a list of key words frequently used in essays on the back of this handout.

For additional study skills resources and program information, visit the ODI Tutoring Program website at http://go.osu.edu/odi-tutor.

Key Words

Analyze: To divide something into its parts in order to understand it better; to show how the parts work together to produce the overall pattern.

Compare: To look at the characteristics or qualities of several things and identify their similarities or differences. Do not just describe the traits; define how the things are alike and how they are different.

Contrast: To identify the differences between 2 or more things.

Criticize/Critique: To analyze and judge something. Criticism can be positive, negative, or both. A criticism should generally contain your own judgments (supported by evidence) and those of other authorities who can support your point.

Define: To give the meaning of a word or an expression. Giving an example sometimes helps to clarify a definition, but an example by itself is not a definition.

Describe: To give a general verbal sketch of something, in narrative or other form.

Discuss: To examine or analyze something in a broad and detailed way. Discussion often includes identifying the important questions related to an issue and attempting to answer these questions. A good discussion explores all relevant evidence and information.

Evaluate: To discuss the strengths and weaknesses of something. Evaluation is similar to criticism, but the word evaluate places more stress on the idea of how well something meets a certain standard or fulfills some specific purpose.

Explain: To clarify an idea, explain generally why or how something has come about.

Interpret: To explain the meaning of something. In science, you might explain what an experiment shows and what conclusions can be drawn from it. In a literature course, you might explain—or interpret—what a poem means beyond the literal meaning of the words.

Justify: To argue in support of some decision or conclusion by showing sufficient evidence or reasons in its favor. Try to support your argument with both logical and concrete examples.

Narrate: To relate a series of events in the order in which they occurred. Generally, you will also be asked to explain something about the events you are narrating.

Outline: To present a series of main points in appropriate order. Some instructors want an outline with Roman numerals for main points followed by letters for supporting details. If in doubt, clarify with the instructor whether he or she wants a formal outline.

Prove: To give a convincing logical argument and evidence in support of a given statement.

Review: To comment on the main points of a problem or a series of statements. A review question usually also asks you to evaluate or criticize.

Summarize: To give information in brief form, omitting examples and details. A summary is short yet covers all important points.

Trace: To narrate a course of events, drawing connections from one event to the next.