

How to Prepare for a 'Short Answer' Exam

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Exams in certain of my courses sometimes consist partly or wholly of “short answer” questions, each intended to be answerable in 1 to 50 words. If you find that you have written 75 words in response to such a question, that is too much.

The Exam:

I see exams as teaching tools in just the same sense as the other elements of the course, so questions are usually selected to serve as memory reinforcement tools – one more chance to remind you of important matters that I hope you will still retain long after the course is over. Accordingly, most questions are focused on what I see as important causal processes – either directly on the causal logic of an issue, or on specific events or facts that I think help explain or demonstrate something about a wider causal process.

Very roughly, I try to draw questions half from matters discussed in lecture and half from course readings. Questions drawn from the readings will tend to focus on matters of high importance that we did **not** get a chance to address in lecture; I try to design readings to provide value added beyond what happens in class.

I avoid questions that rely on pure memorization. I never use questions to which the answer is simply a date or a person's name. I do commonly write questions in the reverse format, in which you are asked what is important about a certain event or person (or about the main ideas of a certain author's writings). I sometimes write questions that ask you to put several events in chronological order, if I think that the order illustrates something causally important. I also write questions about definitions of key terms or concepts because I believe that strong command of these is often essential to understanding arguments about causes and effects.

I sometimes ask questions that ask for two or more examples of a phenomenon. In such cases, make sure that your answers are **distinct** from each other. For instance, “because he got more electoral votes” and “because he won Ohio” would not qualify as two distinct reasons why George W. Bush won the election of 2004. Partial credit would be appropriate, however.

The study method I recommend is to write a dummy exam yourself, consisting of 4 to 5 times as many questions as you actually expect to face on the exam. Having written a question, you will also have considered how you would answer it. Small differences in wording should not matter – providing, of course, that you do pay attention to the way I word each question as it appears on the actual exam. The basic logic is that if you have me outnumbered by 4 or 5 to 1, then even if there are substantial differences between my judgment and yours as to what are the most important issues, you are bound to hit the majority the questions that actually do appear on the exam.

This method can serve as your main study effort; if you execute it fully, it should not be necessary to do much other preparation. First, estimate how many questions you need; if, say, you expect about 20 questions on the exam, then you need about 80 to 100 of your own. Divide by the total number of readings and lecture notes you have; if you have about 40, then you need to generate roughly 2-3 questions per reading or lecture. Then, as you review your lecture notes and the course readings, be constantly on the lookout for potential exam questions; ask yourself what you would ask if you were writing the exam (besides its direct preparation value, this approach is also an excellent device for “keeping your head in the game” while you study and avoiding losing focus).

A **still better** method is to conduct this treasure hunt while reading **before** each class. First, this will make you superbly prepared every day, and probably more confident as well. Second, it gets a huge portion of your exam preparation done automatically at essentially zero cost. Similarly, you should do with your lecture notes as soon as possible **after** each class session.) Then, when it comes time to study before the exam, as you re-read and re-consider your notes you may find a handful of new questions that had not occurred to you the first time around, or you may strike out a few that no longer seem important – but most of your work will have been long since done.

Finally, share your list of questions and answers with colleagues. Each of you will find that others have noticed good question ideas that you did not, and you will also find a few questions about which you and your colleagues will have worthwhile arguments about the best way to answer.

You can also create a “virtual study group” by posting suggested questions (and answers) on the discussion forum I will provide on the course web site for this purpose, and responding to others who post there. As the exam date approaches, I will also monitor this board and comment on the suggested questions and answers.

Historically, I have sometimes drawn as much as 25% of an exam from student submissions.

Students who have fully executed this method for similarly designed exams I have given in past semesters have tended to report very high hit rates for real exam questions, even when studying alone, and still higher when they follow up with a final study group as discussed above. My own informal follow-up inquiries have suggested a near-perfect correlation between students who say that they fully executed this method and the top exam scores.

Last, be aware that this method will **not** solve – and can even exacerbate – one danger, namely that of not reading the actual exam questions carefully enough. While you and I may hit on the same substantive matter as good material for an exam, most likely we will not phrase the questions exactly the same way, which may mean that the appropriate responses will be different. (This is unavoidable, as my questions must be specific enough to be answerable in reasonable times.)

In such instances, you will almost certainly have good command of the substance of the issue, but may still miss the exam question if you do not focus on exactly what is being asked. For instance, on a recent IR 34 exam I asked: "By 1864, the increased deadliness of rifles compared with muskets caused soldiers on both sides of the U.S. Civil War to begin doing something every day that they had not done before. What?" Correct answers included "entrench" or "start building field fortifications." Many students who certainly understood the impact of rifles received partial or no credit because they gave response that, while accurate, were not responsive to the question. On a typical exam, I almost always encounter a few papers where this problem made a significant difference in the student's grade.

There are two things you can do about this. First, while taking the exam itself, read all questions carefully. **Ask** for assistance if not sure of my meaning. I will try to guide you to the critical words. In the example above, any student who focused on the words "1864" and "that they had not done before" would almost certainly have come up with the right answer.

Second, sensitize yourself to careful reading by practicing with alternate wordings for questions. Take five questions that you have written yourself in preparation for the exam and, for each one, write an alternate question on the same substantive matter but written so that it calls for a different answer. For example, a pair for IR 132 might be "What are the essential components of a communal power-sharing agreement?" and "What is the most common reason why communal power-sharing agreements break down?" Get a friend to do this too, then exchange lists. If one round of this exercise does not improve you confidence enough, do it again with different material. Both the task of attempting to write paired-but-not-identical questions and the exercise of attempting to answer such pairs should go a long way to giving you an eagle-eyed ability to pick out the critical words that distinguish potentially similar exam questions from each other.