

Many people feel that they do not perform well in exams because they cannot write well under pressure. Exams are daunting to most people, but there are ways you can improve your exam essay writing.

Before the exam: Improve your writing skills

Obviously exam essays differ in many ways from those written during the semester. However, to be effective, both types of essays need to answer the question asked, communicate ideas clearly, and be well organised. So, any work you do during the semester to improve your essay writing skills in these three areas will pay dividends in the exam situation. The SLC offers a variety of writing workshops as well as individual appointments with writing tutors.

In addition, you should:

- **Find out about the scope and type of questions asked in your subject** by looking at questions from past exam papers. Don't try to predict the exact questions you will be set, or prepare model answers. If you do, you run the risk of trying to make a prepared essay fit a question it does not really answer. You may even misread the question because you are expecting something else. It is better to be familiar with the key ideas in the topic and the common question types, and to have practised analysing and planning under time pressure.
- **Practise exam writing skills using past exam questions.** Concentrate on practising analysing questions and logically organising ideas. You can do this on your own or, better still, in a group where you can comment on each others' efforts. Sit a "practice exam" in which you keep to the same time limit and conditions as the real exam.

In the exam:

Follow an essay writing process

It may be tempting to launch straight into your first essay answer in the exam, fearing that you will run out of time, but planning will improve the final product.

Follow the process of:

think → gather ideas → organise → write → check

Think

1. Read the whole paper carefully.

2. Choose which questions you will answer. Once you have made your choice, stick to it. Don't change your mind half way through writing an answer, because you will never regain that lost time (and marks).

3. Interpret each question carefully.

- Identify the **instruction** words (i.e. the word which tells you what type of answer to produce – the SLC has a list of common instruction words and their meanings), the **topic** (i.e. what the essay is about), and the **focus** of the question (i.e. the detailed limitation of the topic - or, more specifically what the essay should be about)
- Perhaps rephrase the question in your own words.

For example,

<u>Discuss</u>	<u>the roles recreation and sport played in</u>
<i>Instruction</i>	<i>Focus</i>

<u>the emancipation of pakeha women</u>	<u>between 1840 and 1930.</u>
<i>Topic</i>	<i>Focus</i>

You might rephrase the instruction as: “Did sport and recreation affect the emancipation of pakeha women between 1840 and 1930 ?” or “How did sport and recreation affect the emancipation of pakeha women between 1840 and 1930?”

Interpreting the question is a crucial stage of the process. You should be sure that you are going to answer the question in front of you - not the question you wish the examiner had asked !

Gather ideas

- 1. Some people find it helpful to ask themselves a series of questions about the topic,** which they can then use as prompts in their answer. For example, in the question “*Outline the main economic problems facing New Zealand today.*”, you might ask yourself “What are the main economic problems?”, “Why are they major problems?”, “What are the causes of the problems?”, “What effects are they having?” etc.
- 2. For each question you have chosen, write down key words and phrases** which will form the basis of your answer. Some people prefer to brainstorm ideas for all the questions at the start of the exam so that they get as many relevant ideas as possible down on paper before they forget them. Others prefer to tackle each question in turn. Even if you prefer to finish your answer to the first question before planning the others, you might find it useful to have a space for each question on your planning sheet so that you can jot down ideas for questions still to be answered whenever they come to you during the exam.

Organise

- 1. Keep focused on the question.** Look carefully at the ideas you have jotted down. Cross out those which are not relevant.
- 2. Group and order your ideas into a logical structure.** Do this by ranking them, rather than wasting time rewriting the points.

Write

Remember that examiners are looking for key points that are clearly expressed and presented in a logically structured essay form. So, write simply and clearly, and keep to standard essay format.

Introduction

- Two or three sentences is enough for an exam introduction. Begin with a general sentence which gets straight to the point and which repeats or rephrases key terms from the question. Then include an outline of the main points you will cover in the essay.

Body

- Write a series of paragraphs, each dealing with one main point.
- Use the key words from your plan as prompts for each paragraph and expand these into a sentence which clearly states your point.
- Then add evidence or detail for the point in the rest of the paragraph. Use illustrations or examples where possible, and refer to well-known “names” in the field.
- Give your writing structure and flow by using transition words to link your points (e.g. *the next , another..., however,...*).
- Write in whole sentences rather than note form. If you start to run out of time, however, write a skeleton answer and then go on to the next question. Don’t be tempted to go “over time” – remember that you will never regain that lost time or marks.
- If you write on every second line and leave several blank lines at the end of each paragraph, you can easily add points later.

Conclusion

- Include a conclusion to make a good final impression. Try to link it back to the question and introduction by repeating key terms.
- This is where you should draw together the points you have made.

Check

Leave yourself time at the end of the exam to check your essays for:

- clarity of expression
- legibility
- spelling
- punctuation

If you would like to sharpen up your exam techniques, come to a Student Learning Centre workshop on preparing for exams and exam techniques.