

Chapter 17

Essay Examinations

WHAT EXAMINATIONS ARE

Chapters 9–13, on writing essays about fiction, drama, poetry, and film, discuss not only the job of writing essays but also the nature of the artistic forms themselves, on the assumption that writing an essay requires knowledge of the subject, as well as skill with language. Here a few words will be spent in discussing the nature of examinations; perhaps one can write better essay answers when one knows what examinations are.

An examination not only measures learning and thinking but stimulates them. Even so humble an examination as a short-answer quiz—chiefly a device to coerce students to do the assigned reading—is a sort of push designed to move students forward. Of course, internal motivation is far superior to external, but even such crude external motivation as a quiz can have a beneficial effect. Students know this; indeed, they often seek external compulsion, choosing a particular course “because I want to know something about . . . and I know that I won’t do the reading on my own.” (Teachers often teach a new course for the same reason; we want to become knowledgeable about, say, Asian-American literature, and we know that despite our lofty intentions we may not seriously confront the subject unless we are under the pressure of facing a class.)

In short, however ignoble it sounds, examinations force students to acquire learning and then to convert learning into thinking. Sometimes, it is not until preparing for the final examination that students—rereading the chief texts and classroom notes—see what the course was really about; until this late stage, the trees obscure the forest, but now, during the reviewing and sorting things out, a pattern emerges. The experience of reviewing and then of writing an examination, though fretful, can be highly exciting as connections are made and ideas take on life. Such discoveries about the whole subject matter of a course can almost never be made by writing critical essays on topics of one’s own construction, for such topics rarely require

a view of the whole. Further, we are more likely to make imaginative leaps when trying to answer questions that other people pose to us, rather than questions we pose to ourselves. (Again, every teacher knows that in the classroom questions are asked that stimulate the teacher to see things and to think thoughts that would otherwise have been neglected.) And although questions posed by others cause anxiety, when they have been confronted and responded to on an examination, the student often makes yet another discovery—a self-discovery, a sudden and satisfying awareness of powers one didn’t know one had.

WRITING ESSAY ANSWERS

Let’s assume that before the examination you have read the assigned material, marked the margins of your books, made summaries of the longer readings and of the classroom comments, reviewed all this material, and had a decent night’s sleep. Now you are facing the examination sheet.

Here are seven obvious but important practical suggestions:

1. Take a moment to jot down, as a sort of outline or source of further inspiration, a few ideas that strike you after you have thought a little about the question. You may at the outset realize that, say, you want to make three points, and unless you jot these down—three key words will do—you may spend all the allotted time on one point.
2. Answer the question. If you are asked to compare two characters, compare them; don’t just write two character sketches. Take seriously such words as *compare*, *summarize*, and especially *evaluate*.
3. You often can get a good start merely by turning the question into an affirmation, for example, by turning “In what ways does the poetry of Margaret Atwood resemble her fiction?” into “Margaret Atwood’s poetry resembles her fiction in at least . . . ways.”
4. Don’t waste time summarizing at length what you have read unless asked to do so—but, of course, you may have to give a brief summary in order to support a point. The instructor wants to see that you can *use* your reading, not merely that you have *done* the reading.
5. Budget your time. Do not spend more than the allotted time on a question.
6. Be concrete. Illustrate your arguments with facts—the names of authors, titles, dates, characters, details of plot, and quotations if possible.
7. Leave space for last-minute additions. If you are writing in an examination booklet either skip a page between essays, or write only on the right-hand pages so that on rereading you can add material at the appropriate place on the left-hand pages.