Tips on Taking Essay Exams

Reading the Exam
• In the English 28 exam, you will be asked to respond to an essay you have never read before. Make sure you take the time to carefully read the work.
• Bring a dictionary with you to the test to look up any words you do not know.
• Use all your good critical reading strategies: Underline, annotate, ask questions, evaluate, and take notes.
• You cannot respond to a piece of writing unless you understand it fully.

Reading the Questions
• Carefully examining the wording of the questions before you begin to plan and write your essay.
• You must answer the questions that the exam is asking directly. No matter how well your essay is written, it will get zero points if it does not answer the questions being asked.
• Some questions will ask you to summarize a point made by the author of the exam reading, some will ask for your own thoughts, some may ask for you to come up with examples to illustrate a point. Be sure to carefully determine what the question is asking for you to do, and plan your answer accordingly.

Planning the Essay
• You need to take the time to plan your essay before you begin to write it.
• List some of the main points that come into your head, select the best points you’ve come up with to include in your essay, and decide on the best order to discuss them.
• This process can prevent unnecessary repetition, ensure you do not leave out important points, and ensure that your essay is balanced.

Developing the Essay
• Develop each point separately. It will probably make sense to answer each of three questions on this exam in a separate paragraph.
• Don’t try to say everything at the same time. Consult your list, say what is necessary about each point, and then move on to the next item.
• Develop each point adequately. You will write a better essay by including support for each point.

Making Corrections:
• When you write your essay, be sure to skip lines and write on only one side of the paper. Then, if you make a mistake, or decide that there is a better word, or a better way to phrase something, cross out what you originally wrote and write the better version above it. This is perfectly acceptable and is better than trying to recopying the entire essay. You won’t have time to do that.
• Careful planning will save you from having to recopy the exam as well.
• You want to write as clear and error free an essay as possible.
•Making Corrections:
•You may use your dictionary to look up words to check your spelling, but don't look up so many words that you lose valuable writing time.
•Be sure to write neatly and use a blue or black pen.
•Be sure to bring enough paper to plan your essay and take notes, a large blue book to write your essay in, and extra pens.

Plan Your Time Carefully:
•If you have 85 minutes to write the exam, try the following timetable:
  ▪ Twenty minutes to read the essay exam and questions;
  ▪ Fifteen minutes to plan the essay
  ▪ Forty minutes to write your essay
  ▪ Ten minutes to proofread and correct it.
•Keep an eye on the clock. You don't want to be rushed at the end of the exam period.
Composition Committee—Valley College
Grading Rubric for English 028 Holistic Exams

Section I: Criteria

1. Syntax and command of language
2. Quality and clarity of thought
3. Understanding and use of the passage
4. Organization
5. Development and support
6. Grammar, usage and mechanics
7. Response to the topic

Section II: Rubric

5 points
A “5” essay demonstrates superior writing, and has only minor flaws.
A typical essay in this category...
1. Displays impressive syntactic variety, sophisticated vocabulary, and great facility in the use of language;
2. Shows depth and complexity of thought, and demonstrates logical reasoning;
3. Demonstrates a clear critical understanding of the passage;
4. Shows exceptional, flawless organization of essay and paragraphs;
5. Demonstrates exceptional development and supports ideas with strikingly appropriate examples that contain vivid details;
6. Has no or minimal errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics;
7. Addresses the topic clearly.

4 points
A “4” essay demonstrates above average writing, and while it may not be flawless, its errors do not seriously distract or confuse the reader.
A typical essay in this category...
1. Displays some syntactic variety, above average vocabulary, and demonstrates good facility in the usage of language;
2. Displays some depth and complexity of thought, and demonstrates some logical reasoning;
3. Demonstrates a reasonably clear understanding of the passage;
4. Displays fairly good organization of essay and paragraphs;
5. Uses good development and supports ideas with appropriate reasons and examples, but details might be less vivid than in an A essay;
6. May have some errors in grammar, usage and mechanics, but they do not impede understanding;
7. Addresses the topic well, but may respond to some aspects of the task more effectively than others.

3 points
A “3” essay demonstrates adequate writing. It may have some errors that distract the reader, but they do not significantly obscure meaning.
A typical essay in this category...
1. Demonstrates basic facility in the use of language and adequate, if not outstanding, vocabulary; syntax, while competent, may be a little repetitive;
2. Displays limited depth and complexity of thought, and may contain some flaws in logic;
3. Demonstrates a basic understanding of the passage;
4. Demonstrates only fair organization at either the paragraph or essay level;
5. Demonstrates adequate development and generally supports its ideas, but reasons may lack extensive development, and examples may offer only basic supporting details;
6. Has errors, but generally demonstrates control of grammar, usage and mechanics;
7. Addresses the topic, but may slight some aspects of the task.

Passing
Failing

2 points
A "2" essay demonstrates developing competence, but is flawed in significant ways.

A typical essay in this category...
1. Has limited control of syntax and vocabulary and displays little facility in language use
2. Lacks focus or logic, and demonstrates confused or simplistic thinking;
3. Demonstrates some understanding of the passage, but may misconstrue parts of it;
4. Is poorly organized on both the essay and paragraph level;
5. Does not show adequate development; ideas are merely stated, may not be especially (entirely) relevant, and lack adequate supporting examples and details;
6. Has a significant number of errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics, and those errors interfere with reader understanding;
7. Distorts or neglects important aspects of the task.

1 point
A "1" essay is seriously flawed and demonstrates fundamental deficiencies in writing.

A typical essay in this category...
1. Has inadequate control of syntax and vocabulary and no facility in language use;
2. Completely fails to demonstrate logic, clarity, or depth of thought;
3. Demonstrates very poor understanding of the main points in the passage;
4. Has excessively weak organization at the paragraph and essay level;
5. Demonstrates excessively weak development, providing no or wildly inappropriate supporting details;
6. Contains numerous errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics that almost completely obscure meaning;
7. Indicates confusion about the topic or neglects important aspects of the task.

Section III: Scoring

Each essay is read and scored by two readers. The second reader will not see the score of the first reader. The two scores are added together to produce a final score. If an essay receives one passing score (6, 5 or 4) and one failing score (2 or 1), then a third reader will score the essay and break the tie. The final score will be the addition of the two scores that "agree" with each other.

5
4
3

Pass

Fail

2
1
Grading Rubric for English 28/363 Holistic Exams

Section I: Criteria
a. Syntax and command of language
b. Quality and clarity of thought
c. Understanding and use of the passage
d. Organization
e. Development and support
f. Grammar, usage and mechanics

An essay scored with a “5” a “4” or a “3” displays writing for English 28/363 that is on a passing-level:

A "5" (superior) essay demonstrates
a. impressive syntactic variety and sophisticated vocabulary
b. depth and complexity of thought; as well as logical reasoning;
c. a clear, critical understanding of the passage and response to it;
d. flawless organization of essay and paragraphs;
e. exceptional development and supports ideas with striking examples containing vivid details;
f. no (or minimal) errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics;

A "4" (above-average) essay demonstrates
a. above-average syntactic variety and above average vocabulary;
b. some depth and thought, along with logical reasoning;
c. a reasonably clear understanding of the passage and response to it;
d. fairly good organization of essay and paragraphs;
e. good development and supports ideas with appropriate reasons/examples, though details might be less vivid than in an A essay;
f. some errors in grammar, usage and mechanics, but they do not impede understanding;

A "3" (average) essay demonstrates
a. a standard facility in the use of language and adequate, if not outstanding, vocabulary; syntax, while competent, may be a little repetitive;
b. limited depth and complexity, and may contain some flaws in logic;
c. a fundamental understanding and response regarding the passage;
d. only fair organization at either the paragraph or essay level;
e. adequate development and generally supports its ideas, though reasons may lack substantial development, with examples that offer only basic supporting details;
f. errors, but generally a control of grammar, usage and mechanics;
An essay scored with a “2” or a “1” displays writing for English 28/363 that is on a failing level:

A “2” (below-average) essay demonstrates

a. limited control of syntax, vocabulary and little facility in language use
b. a lack of focus or logic, and incoherent or simplistic thinking;
c. some understanding of the passage, though possibly misconstruing parts of it;
d. poor organization on both the essay and paragraph level;
e. less than adequate development; ideas are merely stated, irrelevant, and/or insufficient with supporting examples and details;
f. a significant number of errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics, which interfere with reader understanding;

A “1” (inadequate) essay demonstrates

a. inadequate control of syntax, vocabulary and no facility in language use;
b. failure with logic, clarity, or depth of thought;
c. a very poor understanding to the passage’s main points;
d. excessively weak organization at the paragraph and essay level;
e. excessively weak development, providing either inappropriate supporting details or none;
f. numerous errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics that almost completely obscure meaning;