

How to answer an essay question

Willem Halffman, w.halffman@utwente.com
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1 How correct answers can still be wrong

In written exams, students often know what they have to know, but fail to formulate a proper answer. They answer the wrong question, or think they are done with two keywords. The lecturer is looking for arguments and support and may only find a conclusion, or a statement that is in itself correct, but of which the relation to the question is not clear. Your answer may only be the skeleton of an answer, the basic structure, but miss the details. Especially with respect to open questions these things often go wrong. Here you will find some suggestions on how you can substantially improve your results with just a little discipline.

2 Make sure you read the question carefully

Of the students who fail for exams, a surprisingly large number appear not to have taken the time to read the question properly. They miss the point, fall for obvious trick questions, or even answer the wrong question completely. Make sure you understand all parts and concepts in the question. Questions are often designed to test whether you do understand key concepts and so it is not strange if a question is not immediately clear to you. Most of all: do not begin answering a question too quickly, but only start once you grasp a question completely.

3 Structure your answer well

Take your time to structure your answer well. A complete answer consists of:

1. Statement: the key message of your answer
2. Qualification, specification: more detail on your answer.
3. Arguments or examples in support of your statement
4. Own contribution: your own examples (not from class), or comparisons with other cases. Show that you have understood the course matter and can do more than reproduce what was treated in class or in the texts.
5. Conclusion: why do your arguments support your statement and not others, balance of arguments for and against this conclusion?
6. Opinion: in as far as this is appropriate, you can then add your own assessment or opinion. Your own opinion can be the icing on the cake, but first there has to be a cake. An opinion may not be appropriate or expected with factual questions.

Therefore, an answer is never a “free association”, or a stream of consciousness, listing whatever you know about a topic. Writing down such a stream of thought can help you, but you should do write that down as a draft, from which you can then construct your proper answer, well ordered and systematic.

(You can even use this scheme to write. Use it as a device to structure paragraphs, chapters, or even entire papers. Evidently, this is not a recipe that will always be applicable, but as a checklist it may help to organise your thoughts.)

4 Support your answer with arguments

Pay attention to words such as ‘explain’, ‘arguments’, or ‘elaborate’. This means the lecturer wants to remind you that a simple sentence will not suffice. You reminded to

support your answer with arguments, reasons, or examples. A classic strategy is to weigh arguments in favour and against a position. Examples too can help you to show what you mean. As a general rule, it is better to develop your answer in response to an open question.

5 Example

Questions: “Why are bananas curved? Explain”

(It’s a pun on a Dutch Carnival classic, Dutch students will explain what it refers to.)

Good answer: The bananas you would buy in a Dutch shop are curved for two reasons: first, because of the way the banana plants bloom and, second, because of the way the market for bananas is regulated. *(the main point of the answer)* Not all banana-like fruits are curved, but the bananas at European groceries and supermarkets are. *(qualification)* There are other fruits that closely resemble bananas, but officially cannot be sold as bananas, such as the red banana. The European Commission has regulated the market for bananas, in the process of which a precise definition of a banana was required. Part of this definition is the minimum curvature of the fruit. This definition reflects what European consumers would consider a proper banana. For example, European customers eat their bananas when they are more ripe and more yellow than customers in tropical countries. Apart from this regulation, most bananas are curved in the first place because of the way the banana plant blooms. In the bunch, bananas sag because of gravity as they grow, but this is not equally strong among all banana-like fruits. *(your arguments and examples)* In sum, bananas are not just curved because of nature, but also because of market regulations. *(your conclusion)* It actually is a little bit strange and ridiculous that the European Commission should invest time in regulating the curvature of bananas. One would think that they have something better to do. *(your opinion about this matter)*

Bad answers:

- Bananas are not always curved. *(This may be right, but it is also incomplete.)*
- Because of the way they grow and because this is what the market wants. *(This is not even a full sentence, lacks structure and details.)*
- What a silly trick question. Bananas are curved per definition. *(You may be right, but you will have to explain better why this is a stupid trick question.)*
- This is a typical example of how the European Commission wastes its time on insignificant matters and wastes tax money. The bureaucracy just defines its own issues, without being responsive to citizens or even politicians. *(Well, maybe, but first explain the issue.)*

6 Use the checklist!

1. Statement
2. Qualification
3. Arguments and examples
4. Own examples
5. Conclusion
6. Opinion

Now you not only know why bananas are curved, but also how to provide a good answer to an open question. Can you also see how the structure of this text follows the same scheme?