

Taking examinations on religion.

Nearly all examinations in religion consist of essay questions. Your job is to write a unified essay that addresses each point raised in the question. If the essay test question contains several separate questions, you must discern how they are related, so that your answer reflects that relationship.

In most religion essay questions, your answer will describe a religious issue, will make a claim about that issue, and will give specific reasons that support your claim. Carefully examine the question for any hints it may provide for structuring your answer. Religious thinkers are precise in their use of language. Be certain that you understand exactly what is being asked by the question, and address your answer exclusively to the question at hand.

Once you've figured out what the question is asking, pause and consider what it will take to answer it well in the time that you have to answer it. The following is a five-step guide to answering essay test questions.

1. Write your own list of what the essay question is asking. That is, break the question or questions into discrete parts. This is your own list of small tasks that you will check off as you write your essay. This list will include subjects to discuss as well as the arguments and supporting reasons that you'll use in your essay.
2. Be sure that you cover all relevant aspects of the question. (One way to judge relevancy is to notice what the other sub-questions are about and stay within that subject area.) Emphasize the relationships between the various parts of the question. Avoid writing an essay that addresses only some of those questions. Avoid answering all of the questions separately, as though they had nothing to do with each other. The first error results in incomplete papers, the second in disjointed papers. Both errors may lead you to disregard important points.
3. Take the time to make sure you understand what each part of the question is actually asking.
4. Ask yourself what the instructor is trying to get at with this essay test question. Sometimes a good answer will require you to refer to material that isn't even mentioned in the essay test question. However, test questions are not well answered by throwing in everything you can think of about the question's subject. Don't pad your answers. Always ask yourself if what you're writing actually contributes to a better answer to the question being asked.
5. When you've completed the essay, re-read the question and your check list. Then read your essay answer and be sure that it addresses everything on your list. Many otherwise good students lose points because they neglect this final step. Never rush out of an exam without fully reviewing your work.

Let's look at an EXAMPLE from a religion exam:

"Give Plato's argument for a tripartite nature of the soul. Do you agree? Explain."

The first question to ask is what the instructor really wants here. Given that this essay test question is given in the context of a religion class, she must want you to do religion, which means that, sooner or later, you're going to have to make a claim and support it with your own arguments. At this point, however, you don't need to worry about what claim you're going to make, just ask yourself what this claim is going to be about. You may think that it's going to be about the soul, but you'd be wrong.

What would your paper be like if you first wrote about Plato's argument and then gave your own opinion about the soul? You'd have two separate answers, each having nothing to do with the other, except that their pages are stapled together. Remember that an essay is supposed to present a single idea, so you must unify it by connecting your ideas with Plato's. In religion, the obvious way to do so is by deciding who's right about the soul, and the only way to do that is by discussing Plato's reasons for thinking what he does. Your claim, then, whatever it turns out to be, will be about Plato's argument, not merely about the soul itself. Notice that you will need to describe Plato's theory of the soul accurately and completely, and you will need to give Plato's supporting reasons for why he thinks that his theory is true. Only then will you turn to the next part of the question, "Do you agree?" Let's suppose that you do not. In your essay, you will claim that Plato has made an implausible argument (perhaps you disagree with the truth of Plato's supporting reasons). Be definite. Do not say 'maybe Plato's wrong because . . .' Make your claim. Next you see that the question asks that you "explain." On religion essays and in most other fields, this means: give your reasons for thinking that your claim about Plato is correct. This may take some time, and is likely to be the most detailed part of your essay, because you are getting to the real issue, that is, whether or not Plato's argument for the tripartite soul is good enough to convince you of its truth or not. You may need to isolate each reason that Plato gives, and discuss why it is or is not a true or relevant reason for Plato's argument. You may also wish to discuss whether or not all of Plato's reasons actually add up to the conclusion that he thinks that it does. Before you begin writing this essay, you will have made a check list of the elements that will make up your essay; in this case, your list might look something like this:

- Describe Plato's theory of the soul
- Show why he thinks that his theory is true: reason 1, 2, 3, etc.
- Other arguments he gives in support of his theory.
- My claim: Plato is mistaken.
- Specifically, reason no. 2 in Plato's argument is untrue, because . . .
- Since I've shown that reason 2 is untrue, Plato's main argument for his soul theory doesn't work, because . . .
- Finally, there is a flaw with Plato's other argument, namely that . . .
- Conclude: in light of what I've shown about Plato's position, my claim is well supported.

Having even a simple list like this is extremely valuable for organizing your essay and reminding yourself of the elements that will make up a complete answer. Finally, always review your test before submitting it.