



# Preparing for essay exams: video tutorial

<http://www.screencast.com/t/mJlsMHrbgh>

## Transcript

**Introduction:** Welcome to this tutorial on Preparing for Essay Exams from the University of Reading Study Advice team. The tutorial is designed for you to go through at your own pace and you can pause it at any time.

**Slide 1:** A common concern with essay exams is the sheer amount of material to cover and the anxiety of having too much to revise and needing to remember everything.

**Slide 2:** But the key thing to know about essay exams is that they are a test of understanding not of memory. So essay exams are not about trying to memorise key facts, lots of quotations or set essay plans and then regurgitate them – you are unlikely to do well if you just do this. Instead, they are about showing your understanding of a topic, your ability to communicate this clearly, and your academic discipline in being simple, concise and precise under timed conditions. So essay exams are about applying what you know in a flexible way to answer the question you're set – which is in many ways easier and probably a lot more interesting than just memorising.

**Slide 3:** To do well in essay exams you are certainly not expected to revise *everything* – this is impossible and you won't be able to go into sufficient depth to develop your understanding. The important thing to remember is to be selective in choosing the topics to revise. To help be selective, look at past papers to get a feel for the kinds of question and topic that come up (not question spotting but getting familiar with the expectations). Select enough topics depending on the number of questions you need to answer to give you good coverage, plus one or two back ups in case. Also look at the topics you are most confident in, the ones that will link well together, or the ones that could be used flexibly in a number of ways to answer different questions. This will give you a far more manageable amount to cover. For more on effective revision strategies click on this link to a short revision tutorial.

**Slide 4:** A really beneficial revision strategy for essay exams is to use past papers throughout your revision. A lot of people say they'll use them at the end when they have revised everything, but then they never get round to this or leave it too late. You can start by using your notes to help plan answers to past questions as a first step, then move on to doing mini-essay plans without relying on your notes, and checking back to go over anything you have missed. It is also always a good idea to do at least one full essay under timed conditions to get used to writing by hand again and also to see how much you can physically write within the time you have.

**Slide 5:** It is also important to remember that the type of essay you are being expected to write in an exam is a different 'animal' to the type of essay you are expected to write for coursework. For a coursework essay, you have reading and thinking time so you are expected to demonstrate your research skills. In an exam you are working to tighter limitations so you need to show your understanding within those limitations. In a coursework essay you have to use full and accurate referencing. In an exam essay, a name and date if possible will be fine, but if you can't remember the exact details don't waste time agonising over this, as a short description of the study or theory, and an indication of whether it is recent or older will be OK. In a coursework essay you are often asked more complex questions which need a more developed structure in order to answer them. Under timed conditions in an exam – keep your essay structure simple; a basic introduction, three or four main points and a conclusion will do the job well.

**Slide 6:** When you are in the exam room – read your instructions carefully know how many questions you are expected to answer. Then select your questions – we all tend to be relieved when we spot a question we can answer, but double check that you are answering the specific question being set and resist the temptation to just write everything you know about the topic. Noting down a brief plan (like the mini-plans you did in revision) can help calm you and order your thoughts so you can decide what is relevant to the question and what can be left out. Think of your poor marker and make the points clear and easy to follow. Know your timings so you can move on to the next question. You will get a far higher mark if you have good coverage of *all* the questions required than you would if you only answered one in detail but ran out of time for the rest. Try to leave a little time to read back through your answers to check for any obvious mistakes that could be avoided.

**Slide 7:** People often worry that their mind will go blank in the exam room. Don't panic, if your mind goes blank it is often because of the initial rush of nerves or adrenaline associated with doing an exam. Once you have relaxed a little you will probably find it will come back to you. Some simple strategies that can help; brainstorming everything you know about the topic to help get you started and then you can eliminate the less relevant points in your plan. If you are in the middle of writing, read back over what you have written so far to help remind you. Or imagine yourself explaining your answer to a

friend and start writing down what you would tell them. If you have relaxation techniques that work for you try doing these or take a short break to help you refocus.

**Slide 8:** To summarise, remember what your examiner is looking for – they want a clear answer to the question not everything you know about the general topic, they want a well communicated answer that is written clearly with a strong, simple structure, and they want you to demonstrate that you understand the topic and can apply that understanding to tell them something interesting in answer to the question. If you do the majority of these things you will write good exam essays and good luck!