

Essay Exams



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A Sample prompt:

Rose is quite critical throughout his Lives on the Boundary of the tendency of the U.S. educational system to “institutionalize mediocrity” (or perhaps even something worse) among certain segments of the school population. In consideration of your own school experiences (and don’t neglect your experiences in this class!), argue whether you think Rose’s criticisms are legitimate?

Understanding the Prompt

Notice that there are two parts to this prompt: (1) some *given* information (“Rose is quite critical . . . school population”) and (2) a direct *question* (“In consideration of . . . legitimate?”). That two-part, “*given information, then direct question,*” structure is characteristic of many writing assignments you will see in college, including many essay exams.

It’s important to recognize that although the direct question portion of a prompt like the one above only asks you to state your own opinion (in this case, whether or not you think “Rose’s criticisms are legitimate”), there is almost always an implied or unstated expectation that you will also review, explain, and elaborate the information that’s given in the prompt. Professors want to know and expect you to demonstrate that you understand what’s given in their prompt. After all, the reason their prompts focus on that material is because in their mind it is among the most important information to be gained from the course reading and/or lecture. In addition, reviewing, explaining, and elaborating that information gives you the opportunity to show your professor you have done and understand your homework. It also gives you a more solid foundation (some specific content) to respond to in your essay.

As you consider this two-part structure of the prompt, try to focus your attention on three basic concerns. Look for *loaded key words* and *phrases* indicating each:

Content

For example, the key content words and phrases in the sample prompt might include “Rose,” “Lives on the Boundary,” “US educational system,” “institutionalize mediocrity,” and so on. (Note that words your professor puts in quotes, bold font, underlines, or italicizes are almost always key words).

Perspective

Key phrases that indicate perspective might include “in consideration of your own experiences,” “drawing on our class discussions,” “based on the readings,” and so on.

Purpose

Key phrases that indicate the purpose of your response might include words and phrases like “argue,” “describe,” “explain,” “compare and contrast,” etc.

Writing Effective Introductions

The introductory paragraph of your response to an exam prompt is critical. When graders read essay exams (sometimes dozens at a sitting), they’re looking for a clear, up-front response to the prompt based on your

understanding of what's given. A good essay exam, then, will directly address and then move beyond this given information in an introductory paragraph, as follows:

Review Given Information

Rather than just restate or respond immediately to the question part of a prompt, begin your essay by reviewing what's given (e.g., "In his book Lives on the Boundary, Mike Rose argues that the American educational system often fails its students by "institutionalizing" their perceived deficiencies."). Notice that this sample first sentence essentially restates what's given in the prompt, but in somewhat different terms. Your ability to *paraphrase* in this way shows your full mastery of the information in question. Note also, however, that it's important to select and repeat certain *key words* (here it's "institutionalize") in order to make the connection between your response and the prompt as clear as possible.

Explain and Elaborate

Next, very briefly explain and elaborate the significance of this given information. In this case, for example, the next step is to describe what Rose means by the phrase "institutionalize mediocrity" (e.g., "What Rose means by this phrase is that when our schools label students as slow or remedial, those labels tend to become self-fulfilling."). This explanation/elaboration in your intro needs to be very brief (one or two sentences) because you want to get on with making your own claim about the given material. Besides, you'll be offering a more detailed explanation/elaboration, along with an example or two drawn from the reading, in the body of your essay.

Thesis Statement

Now, as a final step in your intro, offer your reaction/response—your *thesis*—concerning the given material you've just reviewed, explained, and elaborated. Remember, it's not only the question part of the prompt you're responding to but also the given information that question addresses. In other words, in case of the preceding prompt, don't just respond directly to the question, but rather use that question to guide your response to Rose's claim. A good thesis might follow the simple formula: "Although X, I believe Y because A, B, and C." Such a thesis begins by acknowledging some conventional wisdom or opposing view "X" (this gives your thesis tension and complexity), then moves on to express your own positive assertion "Y," and offers a preliminary sense of how that assertion will be supported, or "A," "B," and "C" (these give your thesis substance).

The Body of Your Essay

In essay exams, basic clarity and coherence can be everything. Your professor very likely needs to read a large number of these exams in a short period of time. Therefore, you'll want to make it as easy as possible to follow your response. That means using what's called a *deductive format* for writing. A deductive format, very simply, is one in which the organization of the body of an essay exactly corresponds to the organization of that essay's intro and explicit thesis statement.

Begin by unpacking the prompt once again, but here in more detail than you did in your intro paragraph. Next, pick up the pattern of exposition indicated in your thesis statement. For example, if you use a thesis that follows the formula "Although X, I believe Y because A, B, and C," then the second paragraph of the body of your essay should develop the "Although X" material more fully. Paragraphs 3-5, then, develop each of the points A, B, and C that your thesis indicates support your basic assertion.

A good strategy is to use the topic sentences of each paragraph of the body of your essay to create a close parallel with your thesis. Do this by using wording that is either the same or very close to the wording of that portion of your thesis. And as much as possible, use those key words you identified in your professor's prompt. Ideally, there will seem to be a kind of echoing going on between the prompt, your thesis, and the topic sentences of your body paragraphs.