

How to Answer Extended-Response or Essay Questions

Extended-response or essay questions take care and thought, but they are nothing to fear. In fact, the more you show what you know about a topic, the more credit you are likely to receive on a test.

How To Do It

Good extended-response answers have three parts: a beginning, a middle, and an ending.

Beginning

The first paragraph introduces your main idea or position. It begins with a topic sentence. The topic sentence states plainly the point you intend to make in your answer. Often it simply restates the question.

Middle

The second paragraph provides information, examples, and details to support your main idea or position. This is where you show in detail what you know or think about the topic. If the answer calls for a great deal of information, you may need more than one paragraph.

Ending

The final paragraph sums up your main idea or position. It restates your topic sentence, this time with more feeling.

Now You Try

Work through these steps as you answer the question below. Write your answer on a separate piece of paper.

Many cities around the world are located near large rivers and lakes, or near an ocean. Why do you think this is so? Provide three or more important advantages that waterways offer cities, and explain why each advantage is important. Give examples.

Step 1 Read the question carefully. Take a moment to think about it. What exactly is it asking? Are you being asked to argue a position or to show what you know about a subject? Be sure you know what you are being asked to do before you begin writing.

Step 2 Decide on your main idea or position. You might simply want to restate the question. Write it down. This will be your topic sentence. Then add any extra information that will help explain your topic. That's your first paragraph.

Step 3 Now think. How can you fully explain your idea or position? What details and examples support your main idea? Choose the most convincing details and examples. Write them in separate sentences. Try to write the most important information first.

Step 4 Take a moment to review what you've written. Does it fully answer the question? Do you need to add any more information? Add what you need to and then move on. (Don't worry too much about grammar or spelling. Your answer will be graded on content rather than style. However, do be sure that your writing is neat!)

Step 5 You can breathe easily now: your final paragraph will be a snap! Write a sentence that summarizes your main point or position. The sentence should restate your topic sentence. This time, however, give it some zest. Then add any information that emphasizes what you've written. That's your final paragraph. You're done!

Review and Reflect

Peer review -- having another student comment on your written response or essay -- can be a good way to help you reflect on your work.

Trade your answer with another student. Read the other student's paper carefully. On the back, write your comments.

- Did the student fully answer the question?
- Is there a beginning, a middle, and an ending?
- Could more information be added?

Now trade papers with another student. Comment on the new paper in the same way. When you're finished, return the paper to its writer and get your own back. Read the comments on the back. How could you improve your answer? Did other students have ideas or write answers that show you other ways you might respond to the question?