

Essay Questions

What are Essay Questions?

Essay questions are effective for assessing both knowledge and reasoning skills. Essay questions can tap on complex thinking by requiring learners to organize, interpret and integrate information, evaluate ideas and provide arguments and explanations to support their opinions.

Educational Value

- Measure learners' attainment of complex and sophisticated achievement targets.
- Assess outcomes at a relatively low return of instructor's time and energy.
- Can be integrated productively into the teaching and learning process.
- Encourage better study habits while promoting flexibility in learners' responses.
- Less time-consuming to construct than multiple-choice items.

Examples of Classroom Application

Sample Item stems for assessing reasoning	
Skill	Stem
Comparing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe the similarities and differences between... • Compare the following two methods for...
Relating cause and effect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which are the major causes of....? • What would be the most likely effects of....?
Justifying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which of the following alternatives would you favor and why? • Explain why you agree or disagree with the following statement.
Summarizing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State the main points included in.... • Briefly summarize the contents of....
Generalizing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formulate several valid generalizations from the following data. • State a set of principles that can explain the following events.
Inferring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In light of the facts presented, what is most likely to happen when...? • How would X be likely to react to the following issue?
Classifying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group the following items according to... • What do the following items have in common?

Getting Started

Guidelines for Constructing Essay Questions:

- Identify the knowledge to be incorporated.
- Specify the kind(s) of reasoning or problem solving to be carried out by the learner.
- Determine the length of the essay (word limit).

Guidelines for Scoring Essay Questions:

Because scoring is subjective, it is important to establish procedures that ensure accurate, fair standards of assessment.

- Identify the criteria you will be using for assessing the essays (e.g. writing mechanics, argument, decision making).
- Develop a scoring key or rubric (<http://cid.vcc.ca/development-guides/Rubrics.pdf>) that outlines what constitutes a good acceptable answer.
- Use a systematic process when scoring many essays at the same time.
- If possible, keep the identity of the student anonymous.

Contact the CID at cid@vcc.ca. An IA can help you determine if essay questions are right for your class and explain how to plan a lesson, assignment or test using them.

More Information

Educational:

- Preparing Effective Essay Questions. Reiner, C. M., et al. New Forums Press, 2002.
<http://testing.byu.edu/info/handbooks/WritingEffectiveEssayQuestions.pdf>
- Test Item Construction Essay Questions. Simin, S. S.
<http://www.scribd.com/doc/19628750/Lesson-5e-Essay-Questions-Construction>