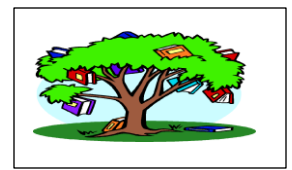


# Toward Better Literacy: Reference Outlines



## How to Take an Essay Exam

Timed exams often have a written component, which can range from a short answer to a full essay. Keep the following tips in mind the next time you encounter this high-pressure situation.

1. **Use scratch paper** throughout the exam. Begin by jotting down any important facts that you've been struggling to keep in your head so that you don't waste any more mental energy on them.
2. Before you start trying to think of an answer, **put the question into your own words**. Make sure you can identify the *heart* of the question, as well as any side questions, key terms, and specific requirements.
3. **Take a few minutes to create a plan** before you actually start writing. This may be an outline, a cluster diagram, or simply a list of key points. Be sure to present your ideas in a logical order, with each leading into the next.
4. **Begin your essay by defining any key terms in question**. Before you use these terms to answer the question, your reader must understand exactly what you mean by them. Provide adequate description, including examples if necessary.
5. **Get right to the point**. As soon as you've laid a quick foundation, answer the question in a single, straightforward sentence. This will be your **thesis statement**. Use the remainder of your essay to explain, clarify, and provide evidence for this statement.
6. **Support any assertions you make** with as many details and examples as you can muster. However, if you find yourself unsure about a particular fact, choose your wording carefully. Being a little *vague* is always better than being just plain *wrong*.
7. **Stay focused**. Don't try to pad your essay with extra information that wanders off topic. If it doesn't answer the question, then *leave it out*.
8. **Use every bit of time available**. If you finish early, read and re-read your essay to make sure that everything makes sense and that you haven't overlooked any problems with spelling or punctuation.
9. **If you run out of time, jot down some quick notes** showing what you would have written with a bit more time. You won't get full credit for this, but your instructor will at least be able to see that you were on the right track.
10. **Relax!** Instead of worrying about what you *don't* know, put that mental energy into communicating what you *do* know.