

Preparing & Taking Mid-Term Essay Exams L. Leibman, Hum. 110 Reed College

Why do we take mid-terms?

Mid-term exams are not meant as a form of punishment; rather, as Edgar Roberts points out in *Writing Themes About Literature*, midterms have three distinct evaluative goals.

1. To see the extent of your command over the subject material of the course. ("How good is your retention?")
2. To see how well you are able to think about the material. ("How well are you educating yourself?")
3. To see how well you can actually respond to a question or address yourself to an issue (Roberts 263).

Doing well on a midterm means requires both adequately preparing ahead of time (so as to prove you have accomplished the first two of these three goals), and organizing your argument before you begin writing (so as to best display what you have learned).

How Can I Prepare For the Test?

1. Make sure you have reread the plays, articles and your lecture notes. Underline important passages. Make a list of the key characters (practice spelling their names). Outline the plot.
2. Make a list of 5-6 "memorable moments" in the play/book. Outline why they are important both to the plot and meaning of the work.
3. Make a list of important themes, issues, & historical concerns. These may include things that occurred to you as you read the plays, or ideas that were raised in lecture, conference, or secondary readings. This list should include issues that have recurred throughout the semester. It should also enable you to construct a historical narrative of the course.
4. For each theme, pick three or four passages that support or develop that theme. Compare how the theme is developed in the texts we have read so far this semester.
5. Meet with a study group to discuss what themes & "memorable moments" you found. Brainstorm on ways that you could support those themes. Brainstorm on possible essay questions.
6. Practice writing outlines (or whole essays) in response to the possible essay questions. Compare results with study group or a friend.

How Do I Write a Good Exam?

1. Brainstorm for five minutes on scratch paper. Most essay questions will ask you take a stand on an issue or to "assess the validity" of a claim. What evidence can you recall to support either position? Do not worry about being coherent. This will help prevent writer's block.
2. Read your brainstorm. Which side did you have the most (& best) evidence to support?
3. Write an outline & thesis. Your thesis should clearly state which side of the issue you are choosing. Your outline should organize your brainstorming thoughts in a coherent manner. It is at this point that you will want to consider whether you will be making concessions to the other side of the argument. These should be refuted. (e.g. Some people may think that the ending of the *Oresteia* is "happy," but this position is misguided for the following reasons....) Quickly check to make sure that your thesis directly answers the question.
4. Begin writing. Make sure that your writing is legible or TYPE THE EXAM. If you have time proofread for errors.