Essay Writing in Exams

Before the exam

1. Make sure you know exactly what format the exam will take: how many questions you will have to answer and how much time you will have.

2. Make sure you do not have any gaps in your notes - check with other students or go to your tutor for help.

3. Memorise key facts, names, data, quotes, etc.

4. Ensure you are familiar with key words.

5. Practice writing under exam conditions:
   - Work through past exam papers to get an idea of the type of questions asked.
   - If past exam papers are not available make up some of your own questions based on the major topics of your module.
   - Test yourself by writing for half an hour (without referring to notes or books) to see how much information you can write down in that time.
   - By practising these techniques, you will gradually increase your speed, train yourself to focus your thoughts, and identify any weak areas in your knowledge that you need to revise.

Why write essay exams?

The point of an exam is not to show that you can regurgitate lots of facts. It is designed to test your ability to organise facts logically and coherently, and to show that you know the material well enough to make a critical judgement on it, not just to throw out a collection of unrelated details. You need to use facts effectively. Do not try to cover all the course material. You must carefully pick out the relevant points and construct your exam essay to answer the question.
During the exam

1. Allocate **5-10 minutes** of your time at the beginning of an exam to read through all the questions very carefully to identify exactly what is being asked.

2. Allocate **10 minutes** of your exam time for checking at the end.

3. Calculate how much time you can spend on a question, relative to its mark value - then stick to this time limit!

4. **Highlight** the key words in each question.

5. **Jot down** any facts or quotes that may be useful.

6. **Make a plan** - this will help you to organise your thoughts and to focus on the question.

7. **Write neatly and legibly**.

8. **Be focused** - be sure to answer the question completely (refer frequently to the key words you have identified). Express your ideas clearly and logically.

9. **Be well organised** - plan your essay: make sure you have a clear introduction that states what you are going to discuss, how and why. Finish your essay with a conclusion that summarises the main points you have made in your essay.

10. **Use supporting evidence** - do not just assert that something is true. Prove it by using facts, figures, examples or quotations to support your point.

11. If you find you have run out of time for one particular answer, stick to your planned time slots and **move on to the next question** (you can go back and finish off any answers during the final 10 minutes you have allocated for checking). You will gain more marks for a partial answer than for one you have not started. If you do not have time to write your answer in full, jot down some bullet points - you may gain a few marks for this.

12. **Check your answers** carefully to see whether you have answered the question fully and to correct any grammatical or spelling errors.
**Key words**

These key words are often found in essay titles, and they have subtly different meanings:

**Analyse**  
Examine the main ideas or components; consider how they are related and why they are significant.

**Compare/contrast**  
Identify two or more views about the same topic and examine both the similarities and differences.

**Critically consider**  
Identify the pros and cons of an argument and justify your reasoning.

**Define**  
Provide the meaning of a term or establish the boundaries of a concept or topic.

**Discuss**  
Consider a topic from various points of view. You should describe and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the various approaches/arguments and then draw conclusions.

**Evaluate**  
Pass judgement on the worth of something. Such judgement must be supported by pertinent evidence.

**Explain**  
Make clear or plain. Usually this relates to the steps involved in a process, or the causes/effects of an event or phenomenon.

**Illustrate**  
Use examples, comparisons, diagrams or graphs to explain or demonstrate a point.

**Outline**  
Briefly review the most important aspects of a topic or the main points of a procedure or argument.