



How to Ace the 'Essay' Test?

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The essay can mean the difference between winning or losing a decisive examination or a challenging job.

Here are the important points to bear in mind while writing the essay paper for different competitive exams.

The essay is "a loose sally of the mind; an irregular indigested piece, not a regular and orderly composition," defined Samuel Johnson, a towering literary genius of the eighteenth century. It might have been so in the days of the French writer Michel de Montaigne, acclaimed as the Father of the Essay, John Dryden, acknowledged as the Father of English Literary Criticism, and Johnson himself. Of late, the essay has scaled unprecedented heights as a yardstick par excellence in the assessment and grading of students, especially the aspirants of high-level competitive examinations. The main reason is that it can test different attributes of a candidate such as general background knowledge, reasoning ability, observation and power of expression, besides the knowledge acquired through reading and personal experience.

The essay is a discursive composition on any subject conveying the author's points of view. This literary form originated in France and gradually conquered the English literary scene with Francis Bacon

in the seventeenth century. It had a steady ascent in popularity in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, mostly because of the decline of drama, especially the artificial comedy. The essay became more popular with the advent of newspapers in the first decade of the eighteenth century. Daniel Defoe's *Review*, the tri-weekly *The Tatler* and the popular periodical *The Spectator*, through editorials and other articles facilitated its rise. The contributions of luminaries of the eighteenth century like Daniel Defoe, Jonathan Swift, Charles Lamb, William Hazlett, Walter Landor, besides Addison and Steele, elevated the essay as the most popular form of literature capable of dealing with the widest range of subjects. This recognized genre continued its onward march braving challenges from the novel in the hands of Henry Fielding and Jane Austen, and reached a comfortable footing in the twentieth century, mainly headed by versatile stalwarts like Aldous Huxley and T.S. Eliot.

Essays are of three types – descriptive, narrative and analytical, and the components of all these types are subject knowledge, sequential thought, imagination, observation, vocabulary, reasoning and reflection. Of these varieties, the descriptive (e.g., 'On Going a Journey' by William Hazlitt) and the narrative patterns ('Dream Children: A Reverie' by Charles Lamb) seem to be less popular of late, compared to the analytical type. The analytical or expository essay is subdivided into the discursive essay ('Soliloquies in *Hamlet*') and the polemical type ('Prohibition Should be Legalised').

Irrespective of its objective, the essay should be informative as well as interesting. In a quality essay, information has to be balanced by illustration,

accuracy by originality, and authority by personality. Variety in presentation, especially that of the opening paragraph, will invite special attention of the reader. Essays should deviate from the tedious conventional mode and be pleasurable and rich in detail. The style should not be too passionate or over-enthusiastic while enlisting favourite viewpoints. The tone of writing should be cheerful but not facetious.

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of the candidate, along with the way in which she/he thinks and airs the thoughts within the stipulated time frame. On getting the question paper candidates have to relax sufficiently, plan the answers logically and organise an effective presentation. If you are het up about the paper and symptoms of tension such as a high pulse rate or a blank mind crop up, an easy breathing exercise helps ease the overanxiety and regain mental equilibrium. If any question still arouses tension, spare it for the time being and proceed to the next one.

Preparation

Candidates should acquire adequate general knowledge well in advance through extensive exploration of the internet, newspapers, books, general



and subject-special magazines like *Yojana*, *Economic Survey* etc.. The National Digital Library of India, a perennial storehouse of about 50 million learning resources including e-books, theses, audio and video lectures, web courses etc is a real boon to prospective aspirants. Reading also enhances language skills which should be periodically updated using a standard dictionary and a thesaurus. Keep a notebook in which to put down striking ideas, stimulating expressions, quotes and anecdotes that can be capitalised on as and when required. Suggestive expressions like a



pipe dream, astronomical prices, relax into delicious indolence etc give an edge to the composition.

Since the natural sequence of reading is writing, aspirants should practise writing essays on a variety of topics. Train the fine art of bold omission of inessentials and judicious selection of points of prime relevance since relevance like brevity is the soul of wit. It is good to adopt the precise, analytical style of rated leader writers of reputed dailies. As the adage goes, practice makes perfect. A mentor having reasonably good general knowledge and editing skills, preferably someone who has cracked the UPSC exam, has to be identified to evaluate the practice essays. Time management also has to be primed during this evolutionary span.

Selection of Questions

Questions are to be reread and selected

scrupulously with a "desirability grading." If there is choice, prefer questions or topics of which you have personal experience. Misreading a question can tilt the answer with irrelevant details and unsought statistics. One way in which careful reading of the question can be ensured is by underlining the keywords of the question. If the question is worded as a question, a definite answer has to be provided sooner or later. It is better not to give a cut-and-dried answer, an absolute "Yes" or "No." Instead, clearly indicate your preference. After identifying the pick of the bunch, go through the instructions once again ensuring that your selection conforms with them.

Needless to say, a high-risk question involves greater chances of winning or losing the game. If justice is done to it, a risky question yields higher dividends, drawing greater appreciation for the candidate's daring. A high-risk question requires the budget of extra time for planning and choosing the details. If you are not confident, prefer low-risk options. The enthusiasm for being adventurous regarding one question should not spoil the scope of the other answers.

On scrutinizing the questions, the candidate has to think on how to answer each question. Jot down in point form, all relevant ideas on the answer paper itself. This gives the examiner an additional dimension of the candidate's insight. If time runs out, the warm-hearted examiner will appreciate the points mentioned even if they could not be elaborated.

Structure of the Essay

In order to ace the essay paper, the write-up should be of sound matter presented with a felicitous choice of words. Innovative subheadings give a



scholarly look to the essay. The standard format of writing a research paper like underlining scientific terms, putting titles of books and stories in double inverted commas, positioning the full stop within the quotation marks etc. is to be followed. The structure of the essay, comprising a beginning, a middle and an end, has to be adhered to, based on a well-thought-of plan. Ensure that the introduction gives a clue to the major line of argument to follow, the body of the essay displays a logical flow of thoughts and the conclusion tenders the main contents in a nutshell.

The introduction can begin with a real-life anecdote, a story, a question, a striking quotation or a definition of the keywords in the question. Of these, it is the anecdote or the story that has a greater appeal on account of its clearer touch of humanity and warmth. A link sentence or a question will effect a smooth transition from one paragraph to another. The technique of signposting, briefly flagging what is to come, helps the examiner judge the direction of thought. Ideas are to be substantiated through real-life examples, recent statistics, relevant constitutional provisions etc. Even on a controversial topic, the tone of the writing should be impersonal, irrespective of individual views or loyalties.

A well-prepared plan helps add new details, shift the emphasis and shed irrelevancies. If a digression is required,

the prethink enables a safe return to the original track. The scheme also facilitates the allotment of adequate time to each point and monitor the progress of the arguments. Your stance on the issue or attitude to the question is to be expressed early enough without holding it in suspense for a telling climax. State your preferred opinions in razor-sharp wit, augmented with examples in support, discussing opposing arguments, if any. Better not to stick slavishly to the view implied in the question or to totally disagree. Facts and figures quoted should be accurate but not too elaborate or excessive. Abstract statements and broad generalisations are to be anchored with specific cases. However humorous or imaginative you are, your comic muse is to be kept under control while dealing with a serious essay topic like "Should Capital Punishment be Abolished or Not?"

Handwriting also is a major feature of offline examinations. A stylish, curvive writing has its own advantage, besides legibility.

Language Skills

A good essay demonstrates the fundamental qualities of good writing: clarity, conciseness and simplicity through crisp and powerful sentences. Technical terms and complex words like acronyms and abbreviations are to be explained. Long winding sentences and grandiloquent phrases are to be avoided. "In literature as in finance", as Washington Irving observes, "much paper and much poverty exist." The essay cannot compromise basic grammar, spelling and diction or choice of words and shades of meaning. The practice of qualifying views repeatedly with phrases like 'It seems to me' and 'As far as I am concerned' creates only an adverse impression.



Points to Steer Clear of

Since a natural, unaffected style is what the examiner prefers, a bombastic and highfalutin language is to be shunned. A flowery or decorated style is outmoded; so also are slang and euphemism (a polite expression used instead of an upsetting one). Avoid stating the obvious and repeating the same phrase, and choose striking metaphors which



are illustrations in miniature. Never ever parade irrelevant scholarship. It is appreciable to have the courage of conviction, but too many superlatives will become self-stultifying. New words entering the language frequently from American English, also linked to technology, are not to be used when it is too early. The essay is to be written in plain British English. Words and spellings in American English, if used, should be consistent. Indianism like 'godown' (warehouse) and without coffee (diet coffee) is regarded sub-standard.

L.A. Hill, noted English essayist, enumerates a few defects to be kept clear of. "Avoid jargon (e.g. re your letter to hand, meaning 'with reference to the letter which I have received from you'), officialese (e.g. it is apprehended that, meaning 'I suppose'), hackneyed expressions (e.g. Adam's ale for 'water'...), rhetorical flourishes (e.g. This

is a subject of great importance to many people nowadays, and therefore one which I feel I should discuss seriously and honestly...), empty verbiage (e.g. I feel obliged to add that, doubtless, many people appreciate that it is a matter of the greatest importance that information about possible cases of cruelty to children should be passed on to the appropriate authorities immediately.) and circumlocutions (e.g. I will cause investigations to be made with a view to ascertaining the information, instead of 'I will find out')."

The essay has to be concluded in an optimistic, futuristic note. Arguments are to be consummated in three or four sentences following which the vision for the future may be presented. The conclusion is a wrap-up of the arguments presented in a fresh mode of expression. No new point is to be discussed while toting up the views already elaborated. It is a prudent strategy to include some inspiring thought from the speeches of world leaders like Winston Churchill or John F Kennedy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's favourite phrase "Reform-perform-transform" also motivates. Oft-quoted last lines of famous poems like "If winter comes, can spring be far behind?" ('Ode to the West Wind' by Shelley) or last words of celebrities like "Service to others is the rent that we pay for our room in the hereafter" (Muhammad Ali) can give the conclusion a stronger impact.

Last impression, they say, is the lasting impression. The last ten to fifteen minutes of the exam should be assigned for meticulously editing the essay, scrutinising the facts and figures, matter and manner. Reinforced with the confidence that the fine-tuned product will elevate you to heights of success, put the pen down. ●