Why Give Essay Exams?
By Kif O'Toole

As the semester ends, many are designing final exams. While multiple choice and short answer formats remain popular, some professors prefer essay exams, because these exams facilitate critical thinking skills. Students may write their answers in class during a specific time limit or work outside class and turn in essays later. What follows is a survey of professors who utilize both types of exams.

David Waselkow, an instructor of American Government and Politics, often has students do in-class freewriting and assigns one paragraph statements as homework. The purpose of these two assignments is to generate class discussion or increase students' understanding of lectures. This exercise also prepares students to respond to short-answer questions in two to three paragraphs on the in-class final exam. They do longer essays and multiple choice questions as well. In the essays, Waselkow looks for thesis-centered writing that links ideas and concepts together. According to Waselkow, essay exams present two opportunities: students who may not excel at multiple choice tests boost their grade by writing, and the writing "operationalizes text and lecture material, putting everything in motion; they see processes and relationships." Overall, he believes essay exams get students to do more than memorize material.

Jim Thomas assigns take-home essay exams as well as in-class essays for his Sociology of Corrections course. However, he sets higher expectations for the take-home essays, because students may have up to 72 hours to write their answers. To earn the optimum grade, students must incorporate material beyond lecture or the textbook and "focus relevant information more tightly on the answer than for in-class exams." Similar to Waselkow, Thomas feels in-class or take-home essay exams help students organize material and articulate it in a focused way. "It allows integration of material, facilitates problem-solving questions, and it encourages students to exercise recall of specific information." Thomas assigns take-home exams because he dislikes the way time imposes limits on in-class writing.

Overall, he thinks take-home exams measure "a student's ability to assimilate, integrate, and articulate course information in a way that addresses a specific issue."

Nancy Wingfield assigns take-home essays in two courses: France since 1815 and the French Revolution and Napoleon. Wingfield wants students to answer the questions of their choice at their own pace, in their own environment. Students also have the opportunity to display their writing skills, but she stresses that this goes beyond correct grammar. "I am talking about the almost invisible line between good writing/presentation and good analysis. It is very difficult to make an effective argument or exhibit one's analytic ability if the vehicle (e.g. timed essays) is bad."

Gregory Schmidt, associate professor of political science, utilizes essay exams in both undergraduate and graduate courses. For his graduate courses, Schmidt offers a choice of questions that have a broader focus or questions that ask for a close critique of literature. Students have two weeks to complete these kinds of exams.

In undergraduate courses, Schmidt assigns students two questions to guide in-class essays. However, he gives the questions to students at least a week in advance. Schmidt said that essay exams allow students to apply their knowledge in different ways. At the graduate level, essays "allow students to synthesize, interpret, compare, and critique very diverse, theoretical and substantive works." At the undergraduate level, students learn how to use material learned in class to support arguments. In courses such as Com-
How to Prepare Students to Take an Essay Exam
Tips by Kit O'Toole

The challenge students face when writing a timed, in-class exam or a take-home exam remains the same: how to produce a well-written, organized essay that responds to a specific question. Spending a few minutes in class to discuss strategies for writing an essay exam can help your students better plan their answers, resulting in better-organized answers. You may want to share the following steps with your students, so they can meet the task more effectively:

1. Read the entire question. Underline key words in the instructions such as compare/contrast, explain, analyze, or argue. This will help you organize and formulate your answer. If you are responding to a passage, read the question first before reading the passage. This technique will help guide your reading so you can identify important points.

2. Devise the thesis statement. On a piece of scratch paper, write your thesis statement, making sure it answers the question directly.

3. Sketch out a rough outline. Write down the major points you plan to make in support of your thesis. Jot down key words for examples you plan to use from texts (and make sure these examples are relevant to your thesis).

4. Write the essay. Use your outline as a map or guide for organizing your essay. Write out the entire answer, not worrying about grammar at this point.

5. Revise and proofread the essay. Check for spelling errors or other grammatical problems. Double check to ensure that your organization follows the thesis and that your essay properly addresses the question. Compare your essay to your original outline to make sure you have not left out any details. If you are handwriting your essay, make your corrections legible.

6. If this is an in-class essay, pace yourself. Take 5-10 minutes to read the question and design your outline at the start. Leave enough time for writing and revising.

Essay Exams (cont’d)

Tim Aurand and his colleagues teach more than 300 students in two sections of UBUS 311: Applications Seminar. They decided to contact Kelli Keltz and Brad Peters from the WAC Program, to help their students get focused on a collaborative project requiring groups to write up a preliminary feasibility study in overseas marketing and manufacturing.

The students examined a sample website on business conditions in Argentina and did an extended analysis of the site as a source. During the exercise, the students also constructed a focused outline of their own project. They determined what stance their group would take in marketing and/or manufacturing a product overseas. They deliberated on the design and use of graphics. They critiqued the sources they’d collected so far. After weighing external environmental and internal organizational factors, they reconsidered their group’s stance.

Aurand and his colleagues were surprised by the quality of informal writing that their students produced in an effort to create outlines. Students enjoyed the exercise, and Aurand discovered how far along the groups were in developing their projects.

Writing in large classes presents a particular challenge, but combining brief, informal writing with lecture/discussion yields surprising rewards for everyone.