

Essay Questions

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Essay questions can be a very valuable tool for performing assessments of student learning, but there are a few "gotcha's" to be avoided. This brief document provides some guidance in using essay questions for these purposes. Essay questions are particularly useful in assessing student mastery of the overall concepts, methods, and status of a subject.

An essay question is one to which the student is expected to write an answer of at least three lines and, sometimes, more than a page. Instructors in any field can use essay questions to determine student capabilities for understanding a specific situation, determining appropriate responses in a particular situation, understanding the state-of-knowledge limitations in this area, or describing the steps involved in a specific approach.

The first "gotcha" involves the natural tension between a course instructor's desire to constrain possible student answers and the generality of most program outcomes. An instructor often wishes to make certain that the student can explain or use a specific method. A program's outcome usually refers to a more general goal: the student's mastery of the whole of the common principles, practices, and considerations of a particular subject. For example, the instructor of a course in economic history might expect a student's answers to emphasize economic considerations; in particular, the economic considerations presented in the course or even the last few weeks of the course. The outcome might involve a student mastering how historians analyze a given situation where economic considerations are only one of many aspects. Two techniques address this common difference in goals: (1) essay questions for outcomes assessment can be asked in a capstone experience that emphasizes the entire subject rather than the specific parts covered in individual courses, and (2) a series of essay questions from different courses can be used together to assess the general outcome.

The second "gotcha" involves the limited time students may have to prepare and present their answers to essay questions. If one is attempting to assess student mastery of the practices of professionals in a given subject, for example, the five to fifteen minutes a student is usually given to answer a question on an examination does not reflect a realistic situation. If the essay question is part of an out-of-class assignment, the student still is placed in the unrealistic situation of not being able to consult a client for additional information. This problem can be addressed either by expanding the essay question situation to provide an actual client, or by requiring that the essay answer include questions the student would have asked and the student's assumptions concerning a client's answers to those questions.

A third "gotcha" to be avoided is the circumstance in which a student has a different understanding of the question and different expectations for the characteristics of a desired answer than the assessor. It is surprisingly difficult to ask a broad, general question in any subject without unsuspected ambiguity or misunderstanding occurring.

One useful approach involves the student response beginning with the student's restatement of the question and the expectations imposed upon the answer.

In using student responses to essay questions for assessment purposes, it is most effective to have two or three faculty members (other than the course instructor) read the responses. Students are no longer identified with the responses and scores or comments by the instructor are removed. The readers review the responses in relation to the outcomes the question is supposed to be measuring. This "secondary reading" of the responses differs from the instructor's reading for the purpose of assigning a score or grade.

The responses can be judged on a scale such as 1 = does not meet the expectation, 2 = meets the expectation, and 3 = exceeds the expectation (of the outcome). The readers can identify several aspects or traits expected in the student answer that are part of the related outcome. For an example, see [Writing Assignments](#) by Shaw and Kuzel.

A tally sheet showing the frequency distribution of ratings provides evidence of patterns, that is where learning is going well and where it may need improvement. From the patterns, the department has evidence to consider in making revisions.