

Essay exams in business courses test your ability to apply your understanding of the key knowledge from the course, to analyse and discuss real world business issues and practice, and to organise your ideas clearly and logically in an essay form. **They do not test your ability to memorise and reproduce.**

Preparing for essay exams

Essay exams usually offer a range of questions based on the major themes / topics covered in the course. So organise your preparation around these main themes.

1. Think about what is important in the course (and what you should concentrate on in your revision)

- a. Identify key concepts and theoretical frameworks and important issues:
 - **The Course Outline and lecture/tutorial timetable** indicate the main topic areas/concepts/issues. They also suggest how the topics are related – the way the whole course ‘fits together’ as a body of knowledge.
 - **The Course Aims/Learning Outcomes** tell you what you are expected to be able to DO by the end of the course – these are probably what you will be asked to demonstrate in your exam answers e.g. *Develop an understanding of the impact of culture on business behaviours and practices including intercultural communication, the composition and functions of cross cultural teams, leadership decision, motivation, cross cultural ethics, managing conflict and international business negotiations.*
(taken from an undergraduate Managing Across Cultures Course Outline)
 - **Lectures, tutorials and readings** help you to identify issues, controversies, and concepts that are regarded as important by the lecturer. They demonstrate the theoretical frameworks and models used in the course to analyse and improve business practice. They also provide real world examples and cases.
- b. Think about these concepts, theoretical frameworks and issues:
 - Make sure you understand and can explain key concepts e.g. cultural diversity, and their various aspects
 - Focus on the complexity of topics and issues in the real world - consider the varying aspects e.g. advantages and disadvantages; strengths and weaknesses; arguments for and against; positive and negative impacts; comparison of two approaches etc. – consider differing theorists and interpretations e.g. the advantages and disadvantages of cultural diversity in the workplace

- c. Formulate your own position on these issues, a reasoned argument based on consideration of ideas and evidence from the course, your additional reading and your own professional experience. *What do **you** think are the best ways of managing cultural diversity, and why?*

2. Revise material

- Group together your notes from lectures, tutorials, readings etc. for each theme
- Perhaps make mind maps of topics – write the key idea in the centre of the page, then surround it by concepts that are connected – make links if appropriate between concepts – mind maps help you to develop an overview, or overall understanding of the course
- Make notes addressing complex issues e.g. advantages and disadvantages (as above) – include examples to illustrate your points
- Synthesise and summarise your notes – identify main ideas, include examples – then reduce your summary to a number of key points that can be memorised
- Revise the methodology you have learnt in the course – go over cases from tutorials and readings
- Predict possible exam questions for each main theme (from lecture notes, tutorial discussion questions and past/sample exams)

3. Practise, Practise, Practise

- Talk through the topics with other students – practise verbalising your thoughts, explaining concepts and discussing issues
- Practise writing basic explanations of key concepts e.g. Adler's approach and key issues e.g. cultural diversity. This prepares you for questions like:

Explain

What is ...?

Identify ...

- Practise writing plans and answers to tutorial questions and previous/ possible exam questions, especially questions involving discussion of two sides or complex issues (but don't 'learn' these answers as the real exam questions won't be exactly what you have predicted) e.g. *Compare (similarities AND differences – focus on differences)*

Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of ... Discuss the positive and negative impacts of Comment on issues relating to . . .

Remember to use real world examples to illustrate your points.

A Note on 'Discuss'

Discuss involves more than *explain* or *describe* and is usually used for more complex topics that don't have simple answers. You have to **comment on** the topic in some detail e.g. analyse the different aspects, explain the positives and negatives, comment on differing interpretations or viewpoints if it is a controversial issue, make a judgment, state your own position or argument

- Practise applying theoretical frameworks to real world cases to:
 - Identify and analyse issues and problems
 - Recommend solutions/ make suggestions/ give advice

This prepares you for questions like:

Provide suggestions ... What advice would you give...? Why would you recommend or not recommend...? How can this approach be applied in practice?

Finally. ...Practise handwriting quickly and clearly for two hours!

During the exam:

1. Use sound exam techniques:

- Check the number of essays you are required to do and what choice there is
- Check how many marks are allotted to each essay and plan your time accordingly (i.e. spend more time on essays worth more marks)
- Decide which you will do first (do the easiest one first to gain confidence)
- Stick to your allocated time for each essay. If you run out of time, finish the essay quickly using bullet points. Leave a space in case you can come back.
- Write as clearly and neatly as you can, using single-spaced lines.

In general, you would be expected to write an essay of about 750 words (approximately 3 pages) in 30-40 minutes. You can answer questions in any order but clearly write the number of the question at the top of each essay.

2. Analyse the questions carefully:

The most common cause of poor marks in essay exams is not answering the question! Read and reread the question making sure you understand it:

- a. **Note key words** – the exact focus of the topic AND the instruction words telling you what you are being asked to DO e.g. *Discuss the selection, training and other policies likely to be relevant to the successful management of executives on international assignments.*
 - Remember to cover the various relevant selection, training and other policies (which other policies?)
 - Remember to focus the discussion on the specific circumstances of executives and international assignments.
 - Remember to discuss, not just describe – e.g. say why these policies are relevant, how they can be best implemented, their advantages and disadvantages for this particular situation, possibly compare different policies and evaluate them.

b. Note the different components of the question.

The lecturer often guides students through a complex question by breaking it into parts – make sure you identify and answer each part.

- o **Identify** and **discuss** issues in inter-cultural communication
- o **Explain** Adler's approach to creating cultural synergy to manage diversity in the workplace. **Give examples** of how the approach can be applied in practice.

3. Plan your answer

- Spend time brainstorming a response to the question and planning your answer. If you have 40 minutes for an essay, spend 5 - 10 minutes planning and 30 minutes writing.
- Jot your main ideas, then think about the best order for answering the question. Make an outline, group your points into the Introduction, the paragraphs of the Body and the Conclusion.
- Recheck the question to make sure that you are answering it and that your points are relevant.

4. Structure your essay

Lecturers vary in their expectations of exam essays in the Faculty of Business, depending on the subject. In some subjects, essays can include graphs and tables, sub-headings and numbered points, bullet points instead of paragraphs.

However, if you are expected to write in a proper essay structure, as in International Business courses, make sure that you use **full sentences and paragraphs** (no headings, numbers, or bullet points).

Exam essays are concise, get straight to the point and are focused on addressing the question in a limited space. You must support your points with examples and necessary facts and details but do not include background material, meaningless generalisations (e.g. *Nowadays, there is a great deal of cultural diversity in the workplace*), unnecessary definitions or extensive elaboration.

Introduction (very brief)

- Directly state your answer to the question and outline your main points in a few sentences. Use wording from the question in your first sentence(s).

The Body

- Order points as indicated in the introduction with a new paragraph for each point
- Show clearly how each paragraph is relevant to the question.
- Use connective words for clear, logical flow of ideas. **e.g.** *First, ...; Another important role ...; On the other hand, ...; Finally,...*
- Support your points with relevant examples, necessary facts and details. Draw examples from cases studied, additional reading etc.
- There is no need to reference your sources of information, although you should identify important theorists, e.g. Adler, when discussing his ideas.
- Be careful to stay focused on answering the question – use your plan.
- Remember, to focus on discussion and analysis, not on reproducing memorised information.
- Don't pad your answer with irrelevant material.

Conclusion (very brief)

Restate your answer to the question and briefly summarise your main points.

Remember to reread your essay as you are writing and when you have finished!

Try to leave time at the end to edit grammar and spelling. Exam markers are forgiving of minor mistakes but need to be able to read and understand your essay easily in order to assess it properly. Poor handwriting, messy presentation and unclear expression make it more difficult for the marker to follow and appreciate your ideas.