
Essay Exams: or How to Stop the Grinch from Stealing the Fun Out of Correcting Them

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One of the problems with certain essay examination questions is that students can simply give back what was discussed in class without having the material mean anything more to them than a subject studied and now one that can be put away (forever).

I can only speak somewhat knowingly about my own discipline—literature—but perhaps some of you may find, in what I have to say, applicability to your own field.

In literature we ordinarily discuss character, plot, setting, structure, theme. On a higher level of discourse terms such as protagonist, antagonist, persona, omniscient point of view, metaphor, symbol, tone, allegory, irony often enter the discussion during class periods.

When it comes time for an essay examination, therefore, it is perfectly understandable that questions such as the following are often utilized.

1. In Alice Walker's short story "Everyday Use" contrast the narrator with her daughters.
2. Describe the main conflict in Stephen Crane's "The Blue Hotel."
3. Write a brief essay on the plot of "Blue Winds Dancing" by Tom Whitecloud as a conflict between Indian and White values.

4. In "Paul's Case" by Willa Cather explain the meaning of the final sentence, particularly the word "design." How can the final sentence be interpreted as ironic?

5. Describe the point of view in Katherine Mansfield's "Miss Brill." Is it in the third-person limited, omniscient or dramatic?

These are all good, legitimate and possibly even standard questions regarding a work of fiction.

In fact I would like to acknowledge the source of these questions which is a recent (1989) Introduction to Literature text entitled *Literature: An Introduction to Reading and Writing* by Edgar V. Roberts and Henry E. Jacobs published by Prentice-Hall.

When faced with these questions, the students would have justifiable concern if point of view, structure, conflict, contrast, irony were not discussed in relation to the particular stories. The danger, then, is to have the essay test an experience in which mostly repetition of known elements is asked for.

As an alternative to this type of essay question I would like to share with you the kind of essay question that I became familiar with in New York State. It is the kind used in the State Regents English examinations.

The following question is of my own devising but it follows the essential format of the Regents type of examination question.

1. E. M. Forster, the English novelist, has written a well-known essay entitled "What I Believe" in which he expresses his own very personal and unorthodox philosophy of life. Choose one short story and one play covered in class and discuss by specific references what you feel the authors "believe" about life and to what extent these beliefs are (or are not) relevant to your life. Give titles and authors.

This question differs from the previous examples since it is more general and allows the students more leeway in answering with specific examples of their own choosing. It also allows students to draw on their own experiences and apply these to the question given.

Well in advance of the essay examination I give a sample essay question that has all the elements that will be contained in the examination question itself and we go through some exercises in class to help prepare the students for the exam.

Obviously the emphasis in this type of question is on the ideas, themes and values that an author expresses. These are usually not expressed directly but indirectly through creation of characters, choice of setting, dialogue, figurative language, conflict and resolution of the plot.

We will have gone over these elements in our class discussions. The students now will have to put them into play in their answers. However, I have found that in this kind of essay question there is a welcome unpredictability and personal dimension in their answers that I enjoy and they profit from.

For those of you wishing to devise similar questions, the main thing you have to do is to keep alert as you do your day to day reading in your field and when you spot an interesting quote note it down for future reference.

I am not saying that I look forward to reading thirty essay exams but with this method I find it less of a "grinchy" experience and even somewhat upbeat.

My experience has been that students taking this kind of exam for the first time find it a different kind of experience and may not handle it adequately. However, with more practice and explanation as the term progresses, I am happy to report that much improvement and self-satisfaction is evident on the part of the students and the teacher.