

## Three Types of Exam Questions

Cramming at the last minute can sometimes get you through exams, but it prevents you from performing at your real potential. Instead, follow the “four steps to success” outlined in the “Study Tips” document on my Teaching Policies and Guidelines webpage. Then, once you have a solid grasp on the material, you can focus on exam preparation itself. I typically give three different kinds of questions on midterm and final exams:

**1. Synthetic Essays.** These essays ask you to synthesize some of the larger themes that have been covered in the class, usually by making some kind of judgment call about the values or debates that were taking place in the period covered. The essays need to be organized around a thesis, which is an assertive argument. They also need to analyze specific examples or evidence in each and every supporting paragraph, that is, throughout the essay except in the introduction and the conclusion. Students often note that one of the biggest challenges is selecting examples, when there is a lot to choose from, but only a limited amount of space on an exam. The answer is that this is part of what the exam is testing: you need to make judgments about which examples are most important, which best support your argument, etc. The guidelines for these essays are essentially the same as for take-home essays (see the two-page Essential Essay Guidelines on my website, under Teaching), but of course for in-class writing you do not need to support your points with specific page-number citations. But you should prepare a detailed outline in advance, and commit it to memory.

**2. Short Answer/Identifications.** You should answer these questions in about one to two paragraphs, using full sentences, to both identify the item (who or what, when and where), and to explain its historical significance. In considering the latter, try to think of more than one reason or type of significance, e.g., by explaining at least two major historical themes that this item illustrates. You should think of these questions as asking more for a mini-essay on the broader theme(s) suggested by an item, rather than a detailed, encyclopedic entry. Though some factual detail is certainly needed, the point is to organize your thoughts around the item’s historical significance. To review these items, making flash cards is a sure bet.

**3. Primary Source Analysis Essays.** For this kind of essay (most common on final exams), you will be presented with an excerpt of about a paragraph or two (up to one page) from one or two of the primary sources that have been assigned over the semester. If there are two different documents, you should organize your essay with a compare-and-contrast format. To analyze texts as historical documents, you should begin by identifying the type of document (law, judicial decision, legal treatise, etc.), the author or institution that produced it, and the purpose and audience for which it was produced. Second and most importantly, you should analyze the document in order to explain what it reveals about legal or environmental history. Third, you should try to point to some of the ways this document (or documents of this type) was influential in later history.