Essay items are a long-standing tradition in many courses. The purpose is to determine whether a student can organize his/her thoughts in a way to respond to a question while demonstrating his/her ability to communicate effectively in writing. A major shortcoming of these items is that very few items can be completed during a typical test session/class period. Depending upon the teacher’s expectations, average college students likely can respond to 2-5 essay questions during the average 60-90 minute class session.
Item Writing Guidelines for Essay Questions

1. Restrict the use of essay questions to those learning outcomes that are difficult to measure with true-false, multiple-choice, matching, or short-answer items.

2. Make sure that each essay question is focused sufficiently that students know exactly what is expected of them.

3. Give students guidelines on time limits and the amount of information expected.

4. Several questions each having a relatively narrow focus are generally better than one broad question.

5. Avoid the use of optional essay items.

6. Before giving the test, develop a list of the main points that should be included in each answer and develop a scoring system.

7. Before scoring essays, review the material students were expected to learn.

8. Inform students how you will deal with factors that are independent from the learning outcome being measured.

9. Score essay questions without knowing which students produced which responses.

10. Score all students’ responses to one item before scoring responses to another item.

11. Questions that ask students to draw a judgment or take a position should be evaluated based on the strength of their arguments, not on whether they agree with your position.
BAD Examples of Essay Questions

1. Discuss the migration habits of birds.

Why is this item BAD? There are volumes of books written by scholars in the field that discuss the migration habits of many birds. The lack of specificity sets up students to fail. A student will want to know which bird they are to discuss prior to writing a response.

2. List the sanctions of PL 99-457.

Why is this item BAD? This is a short-answer question as it is asking students to prepare a list rather than write an essay.

3. Compare and contrast WWI and WWII.

Why is this item BAD? This item is not focused sufficiently so that students could answer the question. Again, there are volumes written on this topic. A professor asking this question should expect the responses to vary, as greatly as there are students in the class.

GOOD Examples of Essay Questions

1. Explain the difference between fiscal policy and monetary policy as methods of promoting national economic policy. Cite two examples of the use of each method in the history of the United States.

Why is this item GOOD? The item is focused explicitly on what the professor expects and requires a specific response.

2. State two hypotheses about why birds migrate south in the fall. Summarize the evidence supporting each hypothesis, and defend the one you believe is most accurate.

Why is this item GOOD? This is a judgment question and asks students to defend their responses. It is specific in its requirements thus increasing the likelihood of a clearly supported response.