

Answering Essay Questions

Because the essays for exams are **structurally the same as regular essays**, there are no special tricks for actually writing answers to essay questions. The difficult part of this process is, instead, **adequately preparing for the questions**. Preparation as a standard practice can be broken up into different stages:

Stage One: Notes

By the end of a semester, most students have compiled many pages of lecture notes of varying degrees of **detail and organization**. Regardless of how good your notes are, however, you will want to make new, more concise notes that limit the content of **one lecture** to one side of a standard-sized recipe card.

Example Notes: Canadian Parliament
Lecture 4: House of Commons Part 1
MPs for each Electoral District (riding) - 338 in 2015
Plurality (first-past-post) w/ four-year terms
Rep. by pop. but some provision for prov. rep.
1867 BNA Act; Westminster model
Size: senatorial clause, grandfather clause
Smaller provinces over-represented; Bill C-20
Min. w/ portfolio; Shadow Cabinet; backbenchers
Speaker moderates motions sub. by MPs
Voice votes (can be challenged); Whips
Private mem.'s bills, "free votes"

In reorganizing your notes, especially when **writing them out by hand** for the first time, you will better **commit the information to your memory**.

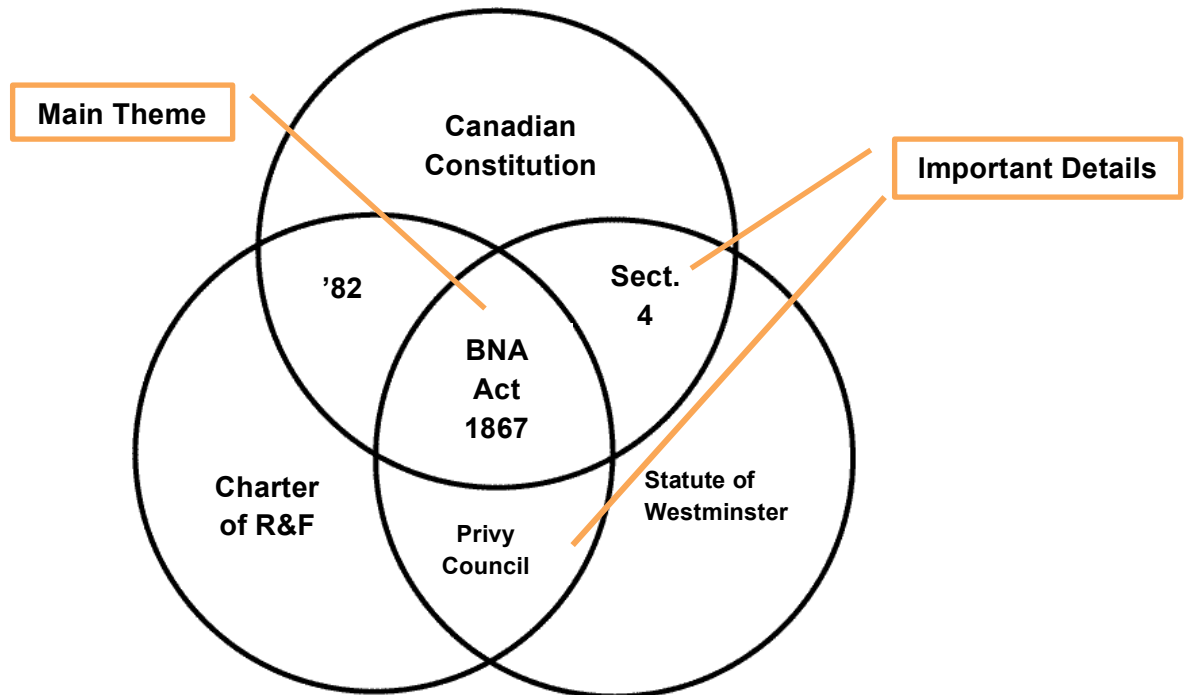
Stage Two: Themes

After completing your study notes, you will want to begin organizing the course's content according to specific themes. Most university professors **design their courses to emphasize a particular theme** or themes, and then ensure that all course content somehow relates to these central ideas. In many cases, the title of the course can be an indication of the main focus of the course, but other places in which to look for potential themes are your **course syllabus**, your **lecture notes**, **presentations** posted to OWL, and in **textbook chapters** that have been included as required reading.

At this stage, it is also helpful to meet with classmates in **study groups** so that you have an opportunity to share **different perspectives** on the themes important to the course, and begin to filter the course content even further by engaging in a process called **cross-referencing**.

Stage Three: Diagrams

While cross-referencing, your goal is to condense all of the information from your notes into more **easily memorized diagrams**. Once in the exam room, your mind will be preoccupied with reading questions and formulating responses, and so you will want the course information you have studied in a form that facilitates recall, such as a **flowchart**, **idea cluster**, **timeline**, or **Venn diagram**.



Stage Four: Outlines

In the exam room, your first step after having **read all instructions and reviewed the different sections and questions** is to reproduce your diagram(s) on rough work paper. Based on your diagram(s), you can then devise an **outline** for the paper you will write. The key idea in this stage is to use a **simple structure** that can convey the necessary information without bogging you down in stylistic concerns.

Include **three sentences** in your **introductory paragraph**: **1) General topic**; **2) Your Thesis Statement**; **3) A brief preview** of the two or three ideas you will explore in relation to this issue.

Include **at least five sentences** in each **body paragraph**: **1) Topic sentence**; **2) A brief sentence or statement establishing the context** for where you found your evidence; **3) The Evidence** (fact, statistic, figure or paraphrase); **4) Your explanation** of the evidence; **5) A sentence connecting** the evidence to your thesis.

Include **three sentences** in your **conclusion**: **1) A brief review** of the two or three ideas you explored in relation to this issue; **2) Your Thesis Statement**; **3) A final, culminating thought** on the topic.

With these point-form notes, you can now answer essay questions.