



How to Prepare for Essay Tests: Any Essay Brainstorm

Do you want to help your child to prepare for an essay exam but don't know how? Try this effective and easy to use tool that our coaches use with their students.

When the specific prompt has *not* been announced use this active study technique to prepare for *whatever* essay the teacher may ask. By anticipating what is likely to be asked on the test and using resources they already have access to, students are able to get ahead in their studying and be prepared for their test. They can also get rid of that awful, helpless feeling when they have an upcoming essay exam and don't know what will be on it. They have a place to start. This tool can be applied to almost any subject area in middle school and high school courses, as well as for college exams.

PREPARING THE NIGHT BEFORE IN 30 MINUTES

Step 1: Brainstorm questions. Use clues from your notes, from the teacher's comments in class, from your textbook, and other resources (teacher PowerPoints, homework, and classwork) to anticipate three likely essay topics. What are the questions the teacher might ask you? You can be wrong on all three, and this process will still work!

Step 2: Draft theses. Write a thesis for each potential essay topic you came up with.

Step 3: List support: List bullet points for main ideas for each topic.

Example 1 - AEB for 3 possibilities (none of which appeared on the actual test)

Below is the use of the Any Essay Brainstorm for an 11th grade unit on the Civil War. **Although the actual essay was *not* one the student prepared for, the student was able to use much of the information for the actual question.**

1. *What were the primary causes of the Civil War?*
 - a. **Thesis:** The primary causes of the Civil War were the North's opposition to slavery, the South's resistance to the federal government telling Southern states what moral values should be imposed on the states, and Lincoln's commitment to keeping the Union together.
 - i. Growing abolitionist movement in North
 - ii. Southern pride and fears about Northern growing influence and lack of respect for Southern independence
 - iii. Lincoln's big picture that the US democracy was at stake if the parts could separate from the whole without the approval of the whole

2. *Was the Civil War inevitable?*
 - a. So many failures along the way: MO Compromise etc...
 - b. Lincoln's unwillingness to let South go and, though he was less public about it for a while, his deep opposition to slavery
 - c. The South could not end slavery, whole way of life depended on it
3. *Did the resolution of the Civil War, the Reconstruction effort in particular, resolve the problems that led to the war in the first place?*
 - a. No, Andrew Johnson was incompetent and had mixed loyalties and a belief in state's rights; he undermined the Freedman's Bureau
 - b. No, the South felt bullied: loyalty oaths, confiscation of property
 - c. While "unity" officially happened, Reconstruction was done in a way that led to a much slower integration than it had to

DURING THE TEST

The example below shows how the student took the information from the brainstorming and applied it to a question he had not predicted.

Actual essay test question

Civil War Unit :

Does the occurrence of the Civil War reflect badly or well on Abraham Lincoln? Choose one side and defend your view with historical events that show the impact of a leader in the midst of a crisis.

Thesis: The occurrence of the Civil War reflects well on the leadership, values and strategic talents of Abraham Lincoln.

Main points:

1. The Civil War was a necessary means to end the horrors of slavery.
2. Lincoln, deep down, wanted slavery to end. Historical circumstances put him in a position to be able to end it.
3. Because the South was seceding instead of just fighting through elections and votes, Lincoln had a perfect rationale for using the force necessary to end slavery. He had to stop the lawlessness of the South. He successfully got the South to start the war at Fort Sumter.
4. Lincoln used many measures to encourage the war to end sooner, which, although it would not have ended slavery as quickly, it would have still led to the eventual end of slavery. Lincoln offered compensated emancipation to Delaware, for example, and did not extend the Emancipation Proclamation to border states that remained loyal.

Mini-Example 2: Predicting for a Literature-based Essay Exam

Predicted questions: *To Kill A Mockingbird*

- Is Scout the hero of the novel? Is Atticus? Are there any heroes?
- What's the novel's take on the American legal system? What are its strengths, and what are its weakness?
- What's the relationship here between fear and race?

To Kill A Mockingbird **Actual Question:**

- The events of *To Kill a Mockingbird* are set in the 1930s, but hatred and discrimination is still with us. Consider examples of racism or other types of discrimination today, whether from the news or from your own life. What can the novel tell us about facing this type of hatred and discrimination today?

IN CONCLUSION

Whether you've anticipated the actual essay prompt or not, you will now be able to integrate your thoughts into your essay on the day of the test.

If you are unsure how to share these tools with your child, we suggest **printing it out and circling the 3 steps of the Any Essay Brainstorm** and leaving it on the kitchen table or typical workspace. Sometimes subtlety is the best approach for a student who is resistant to accepting help!