

The Dreaded Essay Exam

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Surveys in 2 undergraduate psychology classes (N = 86) found that students felt less comfortable taking all-essay tests than taking multiple-choice or short-answer tests. The dominant examination format for students in university and in high school had been multiple-choice tests. We describe measures to encourage essay writing in large classes.

Despite teaching at a university that admits only the top 12% of high school graduates, we encounter students who claim they cannot answer essay questions. Although they are comfortable with multiple-choice examinations, these students report “freezing” (their term) when faced with essay questions. We are not discussing traditional exam anxiety, about which an extensive literature exists in personality and clinical psychology, with treatments ranging from systematic desensitization to hypnosis (e.g., Bors, Vigneau, & Kronland, 2006; Ergene, 2003; McMillan & Osterhouse, 1972). Nor is the problem we have found simply writing phobia (an irrational fear of writing in the presence of another person) or “writer’s block.” Essay avoidance seems a different and less studied phenomenon.

Students’ apprehension about essay questions is not surprising in light of the fact that answering an open-ended item requires more cognitive effort than recognizing a correct alternative in a closed-ended question, although there also is a countervailing student notion of open-ended items allowing for obfuscation that might slip by an uncritical reader. We were interested in learning more about the connotative aspects and students’ experience with essay questions. As there is very little information in the psychological literature about the specific aversion to writing essay answers (Phillips, 1986), we surveyed our students.

Method

We constructed a 15-item Exam Comfort Level Survey and administered it in two psychology courses (N = 86), one upper and one lower division. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Questions covered student attitudes and experiences with multiple-choice (MC), short-answer (SA), and all essay tests, plus semantic differential ratings (Osgood, May, & Miron, 1975) of the three test formats.

Results

Students reported being significantly more comfortable taking MC and SA tests than essay tests, $F(2, 75) = 21.04$, $p < .001$. The effect size was substantial, $\eta^2 = .85$. Table 1 shows the percentages at the various comfort levels for material they knew well. A majority of students reported “freezing,” defined in the question as “your mind went blank and you had to stop taking the test even though you probably knew the answers,” at least a few times in all three test formats (68% for essay and SA tests; 59% on MC tests).

Students’ preferred formats for an examination on “material that is known well” was first, a combination of MC and SA, and second, all MC. All essay was the least preferred. For material about which students were unsure, the clear preference was for MC, with all essay again at the bottom.

Students reported that a majority of their current and high school tests were MC, either exclusively or combined with SA questions. Only 9% of their

Table 1. Percentage of Students Indicating Comfort Level on Material Known Well, by Test Question Type ($N = 86$)

	Multiple Choice	Short Answer	All Essay
Very or moderately comfortable	88	77	47
Slightly comfortable	3	16	33
Undecided	3	3	8
Slightly uncomfortable	5	0	5
Very or moderately uncomfortable	1	5	8

university and 13% of their high school tests were all essay.

Semantic differential scales revealed the following relations:

- All essay versus MC: All essay more active, challenging, and stressful; less familiar and more valuable.
- All essay versus SA: All essay more challenging and stressful; less clear.
- SA versus MC: SA more active, valuable, and challenging; less familiar and more stressful.

For all essay items, stressful correlated positively with challenging, $r(67) = .39$, $p < .001$, and negatively with familiarity, $r(67) = -.32$, $p < .01$.

Discussion

Students might feel uncomfortable answering any kind of an exam item. This survey gives us a relative estimate of that discomfort. The percentage feeling very or moderately comfortable dropped dramatically when the exam was all essay, from 88% to 47%. We discussed these results with our classes. Students view MC and SA items, often taken directly from an instructor's manual and scored mechanically, as "objective questions." Essay questions, generally composed and graded by the instructor, might use criteria that students view as subjective and capricious. If students miss a single MC or SA question, the penalty is small, but when a student misinterprets an essay question worth 25%, the penalty seems severe.

Student exposure to essay questions was low. Only 27% of their current examinations contained any essay questions. The percentage was slightly higher in high school (36%), but this figure still points to a serious neglect of writing. The lack of writing experience might stem from institutional factors, such as large classes, the availability for instructors of CDs with prepared

multiple-choice questions, and Scantron scoring with easy computation of descriptive statistics.

To encourage essay writing in large classes in which all-essay examinations are not feasible, the senior author gives one or more optional essays along with 67 to 100 MC questions. Students must answer all MC questions, but the weight of MC questions is reduced if a student chooses to answer the optional essay. He told students that there is no extra credit for answering an optional essay; all it does is reduce the weight of the MC questions. For example, a test could include a 33-point essay question along with 67 1-point multiple-choice items, giving a total of 100 possible points. If the student doesn't answer the optional essay, each MC question counts 1.49 ($67 \times 1.49 = 99.83$ possible points).

We believe that a lack of experience in written expression, an important and necessary skill in many occupations, will be a problem for students after graduation. Respondents were favorable toward SA questions. Starting out with SA questions might be a step on the way to essays. Other options exist for increasing student writing—online course management tools allow students to critique one another's writing. Term papers and projects provide opportunities for written expression without the immediate time pressure of an exam. Using a rubric, a set of clear guidelines, for grading essays makes the task easier for the instructor and provides guidance for students. Another option is to provide students with a list of review questions, one of which will be used as the test essay. We will continue to explore options for addressing the writing deficit in teaching our large classes

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Note

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