Tips for Essay Tests

1. Remember to read the directions for the exam before you begin.

2. Don’t study for total recall of names, dates, facts, and figures as you might for an objective test. Don’t merely memorize material.

3. Do learn main ideas, key terms, steps in argument, stages in a process, etc. Also memorize verbatim at least some key phrases, definitions, or short passages. These will give an authoritative air to your answer.

4. Do anticipate exam questions. If, for example, you have studied both the fall of Greece and the fall of Rome since the last test, you can anticipate a question which asks you to compare and contrast these.

5. Read through the whole test first. Answers will come to mind immediately for some questions. Jot down key words now while they are fresh in mind, but don’t start writing your answer.

6. Budget your time. Allow enough time at the end to go back and finish incomplete answers and to proofread your paper. When the time is up for one question, stop writing and begin the next one. On a five question exam, for example, five incomplete answers will usually receive more credit than two complete ones, so try not to leave any questions unanswered.

7. Answer the questions you know best first. And don’t panic about anything you think you don’t know. Stay calm.

8. Take time to Structure your answer, even if you are in a hurry. Whenever you can, work from a brief outline jotted down on scratch paper before you begin to write. Select what is clearly relevant; try to avoid a rambling effect.

9. Come straight to the point in your answer. Make your very first sentence sum up your main point. If you are writing a lengthy answer, summarize the key points you intend to make in an introductory paragraph.

10. Take time at the end to reread the exam. Make sure you have answered ALL parts of the question.

11. Qualify answers when in doubt. It is better to say “Toward the end of the 20th century” than to say “1984” when you can’t remember whether its 1984 or 1987. The approximate time may be all that is necessary, but you may lose credit for an incorrect date.