

Essay Questions

Description This is the most commonly-used assessment method in universities. There are two main varieties:

1. Unstructured questions, also known as free-response questions. Students have maximum freedom for discussion.
2. **Structured** or **restricted-response** questions. The student is given far less freedom to determine the nature and scope of the response. Often, the questions guide both the structure and the content of the expected response.

Example 1 *Unstructured Essay Question*

Discuss the suitability of deploying a distributed high-volume financial transaction system on Microsoft's .Net architecture in under 500 words.

Example 2 *Structured Essay Question*

Read the information about Smith College. Describe a) how work is organised amongst the different departments b) how these departments are coordinated c) the advantages and disadvantages of the functional structure d) what kinds of problems this type of organisation solves/ creates? e) Is this the most effective kind of organisation for Smith College?

What Outcomes are Assessed?

- Unstructured questions (Example 1) are excellent measures for assessing a student's broad *grasp* of a topic, *knowledge* of related areas, powers of *synthesis*, *analysis* and *evaluation*, written *communication skills*, etc. They also give students the opportunity to *organise their ideas* and demonstrate their power in *creative* and *divergent thinking*.
- Structured questions (Example 2) have to be used with more discretion. Quite often they work the same way as MCQs do – assessing knowledge of textbook information, rather than critical thinking. For example, questions 2a, 2b, 2c, and 2d are basically assessing a very low-level comprehension of textbook information.

How Authentic is the Task?

By their very nature, essay questions are not meant to be a direct representation of real-life knowledge application. They are useful, however, to stimulate critical thinking and reflection on authentic situations.

What Kind of Learning is Promoted?

Well-designed unstructured questions foster *breadth* in learning. Students can move beyond the topics in a textbook or a syllabus and branch out to discover related knowledge. For instance, the answer to the first example cannot be found in any one textbook. Students will have to research multiple cases and different ROI models to support their views. Breadth can be further enhanced particularly when peer feedback is incorporated into the process.