

ESSAY TEST CONSTRUCTION

However extensive the amount of time needed to read and grade them, and however real the potential for subjective bias, essay tests are still one of the best ways for assessing student learning. While they are pretty good at assessing knowledge of factual information, their true benefit is in being able to assess any and all of the following:

- Problem solving abilities
- Critical thinking skills
- Creative thinking
- Original thinking
- 'Big picture / small picture' thinking
- Clear and structured written communication

Some of the verbs associated with eliciting the type of answers that demonstrate the skills listed above are:

- Compare and contrast
- Analyze
- Outline
- Provide xxx reasons for
- Develop
- Create
- Apply
- Evaluate
- Explain

Unless well constructed, however, essay questions can result in student rambling, confusion or inability to find a focus.

To be effective, essay questions need to

- Be related to classroom and/or homework learning;
- Be clearly articulated;
- Be unambiguous;
- Cover larger segments of material, rather than have a very limited scope;
- Provide sufficient time for the quality of answers expected;
- Require incorporation of factual knowledge;
- Require students to provide reasoning for their answers;
- Include clear directions as to length and structure.