

Strategies for the TExES Essay Assignment

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The essay portion (officially called the “Constructed-Response Assignment”) counts 20 percent of your score. The general assignment will always be the same—writing an essay in which you are given two literary passages (usually poems or excerpts from long or short fiction) and asked to compare them based on theme or themes and the authors’ use of literary elements and/or literary devices. You have four pages in your essay booklet (and you should write an essay developed sufficiently to use at least 2 ½ of those pages). According to the preparation guide, you should spend 60 to 90 minutes on the essay portion. Your essay will be scored holistically on a 4-point scale. You need to prepare for this essay task with the “4” score point as your objective. You might not be able to reach that score, but you need to try to score at least a “3.” For more information, plus a sample essay assignment, see the TExES preparation guide (available online at the SBEC website). (For links to this and other sites, as well as other information about preparing for the TExES, visit the English Department certification website: http://www.shsu.edu/~eng_eoy/CertificationProgram.html)

The Rubric. The criteria against which your essay will be evaluated is also shown in more detail at the State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC) site, but, briefly, here is what they mean to you.

1. **Purpose.** It’s hard to know exactly how this criterion plays into the evaluation process. The “content knowledge addressed in the test framework” is not pedagogy (as in most of the multiple-choice questions) but rather the traditional aspects and components of literary studies as demonstrated in the traditional critical explication. I believe that the “purpose” of your essay needs to be along those lines. For instance, if you wrote an essay which addressed how to teach the passages, you would have failed to address the purpose.
2. **Demonstration of Knowledge.** This is a measurement of your knowledge of literary themes and literary devices and/or elements and how authors make use of them.
3. **Support.** “Quality and relevance of supporting details” means precisely that. You need to demonstrate or illuminate your ideas through specific references to the passages. In other words, it is not enough to say what you think an author intended; you must *show* it.
4. **Rationale.** “Rationale” refers to the “soundness of reasoning and depth of understanding” of your ideas and interpretations. You need to read the pieces carefully and arrive at as enlightened an understanding of them as possible. If you have difficulty seeing a deeper meaning, be satisfied with a more straightforward idea, but make sure your support for that idea is clear and fully developed and supported.
5. **Written Expression.** You need to provide the best, clearest, most effective writing you are capable of in an hour or hour and a half. You simply have to plan your essay. You cannot just plunge into it and write it off the top of your head. Although content is the more critical factor, good writing is imperative. Since this is an on-demand writing, a small number of non-distracting writing errors are permissible, but you should reserve time to go back over your writing to correct errors and polish your written expression.
6. **Other Factors.** Implicit in the rubric but not stated as separate criteria are at least two other factors that you should take into consideration. First, it seems obvious that, since your essay is going to be scored holistically (meaning quickly but accurately) it needs to be carefully organized. Do not make an evaluator strain to find your thesis or other main points. Make certain that your essay begins with a strong, emphatic introduction in

which you clearly and decisively introduce your main point. This is a little tricky, since it is a two-part essay, but you need to state your main idea or ideas unequivocally, even if it is a two-part idea.) On the other hand, do not resort to artificial but crude organizational arrangements, such as the five-paragraph essay. The second “other factor” is sufficient development. It may be implicit in “demonstration of knowledge” and “support” that your essay should be sufficiently developed, but it bears emphasis here. You have four blank pages in your test booklet. While there is no magic number of pages needed, you are very, very unlikely to receive a 4 for a one-page essay. (Of course, just because an essay is four pages doesn’t mean it won’t receive a low score.) What you need to shoot for is full development of your ideas. Try to produce at least 2 ½ pages of meaty writing. Finally, as mentioned above, you should provide a strong, emphatic introduction. The conclusion is not as important. In fact, you might simply end your essay with a sentence or two which brings your essay together and ends it well. But your opening paragraph needs to be strong and clear. You should not begin it until you have fully planned the essay. (You might even consider leaving space and coming back to write the introduction last, especially since new ideas are likely to occur to you as you write.)

Preparing for the TExES Essay

1. **Study the preparation guide.** Begin your preparation by reading the preparation guide carefully, every word of it. You need to be thoroughly familiar with every aspect of the assignment, including the score-point descriptions and the scoring process. The more you know, the better you will understand what is required to score a 4.
2. **Think about theme and literary elements.** Do some independent thinking and musing about themes in literature. What is the range of meaning of the term, and what are some common ones? Think about specific pieces of literature you have studied and different authors have illuminated them. Then, do some work (background reading or focused thinking or a visit to a professor) on literary elements and devices and how authors employ them variously. (By the way, the term “devices” probably suggests the more technical elements of literary and rhetorical criticism, but “elements” is a softer term. You need to know that your essay may rely on hard-core literary devices, but it does not have to. If you do a good job of analysis by using less technical language, such as “author’s voice” or “descriptive detail” you’ll be fine.) You might combine this study of literary elements and devices with your review of literary and rhetorical terminology for the multiple-choice portion of the test.
3. **Review the comparison essay.** Do some thinking or background reading about comparison and contrast essays. There are a variety of approaches to writing comparison/contrast essays. Don’t just walk into the exam without having considered some of the variations on the theme. Also, think about this specific task. It’s a little odd—sort of a two-headed monster. Both sections are about theme, but the first is to “identify and discuss themes that connect the passages,” and the second is to “explain how the authors use literary elements and/or literary devices in each excerpt to develop and support these themes.” I’m not suggesting that there is a canned approach for you, but you should not go into this exam without having considered the specific nature and the specific structural factors of the essay you are going to write. You need to do some thinking about and to have some practice in this somewhat tricky essay assignment.
4. **Review your literary background and treatments of theme.** At some point prior to the test, possibly three weeks before, review your notes from the literature courses you have taken. Generate a list of themes or topics covered in the courses you have taken. For

each major theme, sketch out a summary of the different approaches authors have used to address the theme. You might also consider how contexts, such as time period, genre, literary movement, or critical framework, contribute to the treatment of a particular theme. When you are able to articulate the whole, visit with a favorite professor and ask for some feedback to your overview.

Writing The Actual Essay

Before you write

1. **Read the general assignment.** If you have done your preparation up this point, there is nothing is the framework of the essay assignment that can surprise you. They are all stated in essentially the same way as the sample constructed-response assignment in the preparation guide.
2. **Read the passages carefully.** The only unknown material will be the two literary passages. (I can't speak to you about the passages specifically, but I can tell you that they will be poetry or fiction. It would be nice if you were familiar with one or both passages or authors (and if you are, you should try to use that familiarity to your advantage in the essay), but this essay is a test of your analytical and critical abilities, not of your background. If the passages are strange to you, don't panic. Some of them are a little demanding, but none is overly difficult. All of them are accessible thematically and structurally. Don't panic. You may want to begin by scanning the two pieces, but at some point read each one slowly and carefully, jotting down ideas in the margin or on your scratch paper and underlining key words sentences in the passage.
3. **Plan your essay carefully.** Spend at least 15 minutes reading the passages and planning your essay. Do not try to write the essay off the top of your head. First, read the passages slowly and carefully, making notes as you go. Try to arrive at a general idea of the prominent theme or themes they share and write them down. Go back and read again, jotting down specific representations of these themes and some elements or devices that the authors are using. (Remember that the assignment asks you to write about "similarities or differences." Both pieces will treat common themes, but they may treat them differently. As ideas and examples come to you, jot them down on scratch paper so that you won't clutter your mind trying to remember everything.) Try to leave yourself some wriggle room, especially for ideas that might occur to you while you are writing. Plan carefully, but stay flexible as you write. (But don't let yourself go off on tangents. Remember the need, stated above, for clear organization.)

While you write

1. **Write carefully.** You know your best writing habits and practices, but try to avoid writing this essay in haste. (You have five hours for the whole exam. You can't waste time, but on both sections you need to relax and to avoid writing or answering hastily. Let this be your best thinking and your best writing. Don't spoil it by trying to go too fast, even though you need to produce a developed essay.) Budget your time, allowing time for proofreading and any unexpected emergencies (such as taking longer than you expected on an essay or going blank for a while.)

2. **Write a clear thesis.** Be sure your essay has a clear and emphatic thesis that responds directly to the essay assignment. State this thesis clearly in the first paragraph. You may want to state the thesis in the first sentence or two or lead up to it and present it at or near the end of the opening paragraph.
3. **Provide support.** Provide specific as well as general information in your response by including examples, quotations, and details taken directly from the passages (or from other of the author's works, if you are familiar with some). Make sure that the details you provide help illuminate your thesis and that they are not simply the details in a plot summary. (There's an important difference.)
4. **Use appropriate vocabulary.** As you write, try to use the technical vocabulary appropriate to the subject (though see comments above on the differences between "devices" and "elements").
5. **Use appropriate vocabulary.** Write as legibly as you can, and if possible and if appropriate, leave some space for later additions, especially if you reach a section you're not sure about. (I don't think I would advise double-spacing, though.) This is not Penmanship 101, but if your writing is hard to decipher, you probably put yourself at a disadvantage. Most scorers will take the time to slow down and try to decipher scrawled handwriting, but just think about the task that person has. Again, write as legibly as you can.
6. **Don't panic.** If your mind goes blank or you don't know much about a question, relax and brainstorm for a few moments or go back to your notes. Try to recall some of the assignments you have read for class, particular lectures, or class discussions to trigger your memory. If nothing works, try some pre-writing or discovery technique, such as clustering or freewriting. If you're just stuck, go to the multiple choice section and do some work there. Pay attention to your time, of course, but keep remembering that you have plenty of time for this exam. Take all of it if you have to. Don't panic.
7. **Don't panic, Part II.** If you find yourself out of time but with more to say, quickly write down in outline form what you would write if you had time, and then write a quick explanatory note to the scorer. The scorers are humane, and so is the scoring system. They will give you the benefit of the doubt if they can.

After you write

1. **Re-read for content.** If you have time, re-read your whole essay and make any additions or changes necessary for clarity and completeness. If you need to add a whole sentence, or even a paragraph, find a space and use some kind of mark to indicate where it goes in the text. Write a note explaining. This won't bother the scorers at all.
2. **Check for clarity and correctness.** Check your response for errors in grammar, spelling and punctuation, as well as sentence clarity. (When you proofread for clarity, try to approach the writing as though it was written by someone else. Look at it as freshly and objectively as you can.)
3. **Re-read your introduction.** Re-check to see if your introduction remained appropriate for the essay or if the actual essay drifted from the original introduction as you wrote. Make any repairs or amendments or clarifications necessary. Also, check to see if your conclusion is emphatic and effective. It does not have to be long, but it needs to bring the essay to an effective close.