

Tips for Writing AP Environmental Science Exam Essays (FRQs)



1. The first thing that you should do is to carefully *read* the question. The second thing you should do is *read* the question, and the third thing you should do is *read* the question. Be sure that you answer the question that is asked and only that question, and that you answer all parts of it. If you are given a choice of parts to answer, choose carefully. Don't answer all parts in that case; the readers will only grade your first answer.
2. Outline the answer to avoid confusion and disorganization. Pay close attention to the verbs used in the directions, such as (describe, explain, compare, give evidence for, graph, calculate etc.) and be sure to follow those directions. Thinking ahead helps to avoid scratch outs, astrices, skipping around and rambling.
3. *Write an essay.* Outlines and diagrams, no matter how elaborate and accurate, are not essays and will not get much, if any credit by themselves. Exceptions: If you are asked as part of an essay on a laboratory to calculate a number, this does not require that you write an essay, but be sure to show how you got your answer (show the formulas you used and the values you inserted into those formulas); or, if you are asked to draw a diagram in the question, do so, but be sure to annotate it carefully.
4. Define and/or explain any terms you use. Say something about each of the important terms that you use. Rarely would the exam ask for a list of buzzwords.
5. Answer the question parts in the order called for and label them "a", "b" etc., as they are labelled in the question. It is best not to skip around within the question. the four essay questions do not have to be answered in any particular order.
6. Write clearly and neatly. It is foolhardy to antagonize or confuse the reader with lousy penmanship.
7. Go into detail that is on the subject and to the point. Be sure to include the obvious (for example, "light is necessary for photosynthesis"). Answer the question thoroughly.
8. If you cannot remember a word exactly, take a shot at it- get as close as you can. Even if you don't remember the name of the concept, describe the concept.
9. Use a ballpoint pen with dark black or dark blue ink.
10. Remember that no detail is too small to be included as long as it is to the point. Be sure to include the obvious- most points are given for the basics anyway.
11. Carefully label your diagrams (they get no points otherwise) and place them in the text at the appropriate place, not attached at the end.
12. Widen your margins a little. This will make the essay easier for most folks to read.
13. **Bring a watch** to the exam so that you can pace yourself. You have hour essays with about 2 minutes for each answer.
14. Understand that the exam is written to be hard. The national average for the essay section will be about 50% correct, that is 5 points out of a possible 10 on each essay. It is very likely that you will not know everything. That is expected, but it is very likely that you do know something about each essay, so relax and do the best you can. Write thorough answers.
15. The AP Exam may included what are called *synthesis* and *conceptual* questions. These questions may ask you to indicate the relationship between the concepts. If you do not know the relationship between the concepts, at least tell them what you do know about them individually.

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Do include these things if you are asked to design or describe an experiment:

1. Hypothesis
2. identify Independent Variable(s) - What treatments will you apply
3. identify Dependent Variable(s) - What will you measure
4. identify several constants (VERY IMPORTANT)
5. describe the organism/materials/apparatus to be used
6. describe what you will actually do (how will you apply the treatment)
7. describe how you will actually take and record data
8. describe how the data will be graphed and analyzed
9. state how you will draw a conclusion (compare results to hypothesis)
10. Your experimental design needs to be at least theoretically possible and it is very important that your conclusion/hypothesis be consistent with the principles involved and with the way you set up the experiment

Do include these things in a graph:

1. set up the graph with the IV along the x-axis and the DV along the y-axis
2. mark off axes in equal increments and label with proper units
3. plot points rather than attempt to sketch in the curve/line
4. if more than one curve is plotted, write a label on each curve (this is better than a legend)
5. label each axis
6. give your graph an appropriate title (what is it showing?)

DON'T

1. Don't waste time on background information or a long introduction unless the question calls for historical development or historical significance. *Answer the question.*
2. Don't ramble - get to the point, and don't shoot the bull - say what you know and go on to the next question. You can always come back if you remember something later.
3. Don't use a pencil, and don't use a pen with an ink colour other than dark black or dark blue. Don't use a felt-tip pen because the ink seeps through the page and makes both sides of the paper hard to read. Don't scratch out excessively. One or two lines through the unwanted word(s) should be sufficient, and don't write more than a very few words in the margin. Finally don't write sloppily. It is easy for the reader to miss an important word when he/she cannot read your handwriting.
4. Don't panic or get angry because you are unfamiliar with the question. You probably have read or heard something about the subject- be calm and think.
5. Don't worry about spelling every word perfectly or using exact grammar. These are not a part of the standards the graders use. It is important for you to know, however, that very poor spelling and grammar will hurt your chances.
6. There is no need to say the same thing twice. While introductory paragraphs may be important in English class, saying, "Process A is controlled by x, y and z" and then writing a paragraph each on A, x, y and z is a waste of valuable time. This also goes for restating the question. Don't restate it, just answer it!
7. If given a choice of two or three topics to write about, understand that **only the first one(s) you write about will count**. You must make a choice and stick with it. If you decide that your first choice was a bad one, then cross it out so the reader knows clearly which part you wish to be considered for credit.
8. Don't leave questions blank. Remember that each point you earn on an essay question is the equivalent of two correct multiple choice questions, and there is no penalty for a wrong guess, bad spelling or bad grammar. **Make an effort on every question! DON'T QUIT!**