Preparing for Essay Exams

Essay exams are most often assigned in courses that focus on themes. For example, your history course might challenge you to think about change over time in a variety of areas – political influence, labor relations, or cultural authority. Your literature class may ask you to focus on imagery, metaphor, or a specific theme like rebirth in several different poems, novels, or short stories.

In order to prepare to write about big themes, you have to learn to think about the course content broadly, see the connections between individual details and “the big picture,” and practice the kinds of thinking that you will need to do to craft a well-considered, organized essay under time pressure. The following process may be helpful:

1. Figure out how much content you will be responsible for on this exam. Is it cumulative? Non-cumulative? Which chapters/lectures/readings will be covered?
2. Brainstorm a list of the major topics covered in the material that you will need to know for the test. This should not be a list of every detail you’ve talked about, but rather a list of the major topics. There will probably be 5 to 10 of them.
3. Create a “detail study sheet” for each topic. On each topic’s sheet, write down all of the details that you might need to know on that topic. (For example, if a topic is the Civil Rights Movement, items on your detail list might include things like Brown v. the Board of Education, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and Freedom Summer.)
4. After you have surveyed all of the details for a given topic, write up three or four essay questions about that topic. Try to think like a professor – What would be a fair question? What kind of question would challenge students to go beyond rote memorization? Think about the kinds of questions your specific professor has asked in the past – compare/contrast, tracing a major development, synthesizing complex information, analyzing new situations, etc. Make sure that your questions aren’t too narrow or specific for a full essay (Who were the main speakers at the Seneca Falls convention of 1848?) or impossibly broad for an exam question (Apply Freud’s theories to the entire course of human history.).
5. For each topic, write at least one essay question that challenges you to relate that topic to one or more topics from the course. For example, in a U.S. history course, you might write a question that brought together the key topics of World War II, Vietnam, and the Gulf War: American General William Westmoreland once said, "The military [doesn’t] start wars. Politicians start wars." Discuss this statement as it applies to World War II, the conflict in Vietnam, and the war in the Persian Gulf.
6. Figure out the relevant information about each of the items on your “detail lists.” Make flashcards if they are helpful to you. Ask yourself, for each item, “Why is this item important? What is it connected to?” Doing so will help you not only know the facts, but also understand the significance of each item.
7. Map out a possible answer, either mentally or on paper, for each of your essay questions. Which details would you pull in to answer each question? If you use flashcards, you might pull out the flashcards for significant details that you could incorporate into each essay response. Discuss your possible essay answers with classmates – they may think of things that you haven’t considered.

For tips on taking essay exams, see this helpful handout available online from the Writing Center at UNC-CH: http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/essay-exams.html