

Writing The Essay Exam

Preparing for the exam

- Reread the course syllabus and/or outline.

Highlight key words or terms.

This course explores the development of various critical theories in Canadian literature. Topics include but are not limited to modernism, thematic criticism, and postmodernism.

- Reread your class notes.

Using the syllabus/outline and focusing on the underlined words, identify themes and concepts covered in your notes.

- Pay close attention to any repetition in your notes.

If it was discussed more than once, it is probably important.

Class Notes:

Thematic criticism

- *Developed in 60s and 70s*
- *An attempt to define a Canadian lit.*
- *Thematic four – not usually a compliment by later critics*
- *Often accused of “cherry picking”*
- Write a brief summary of each theme or concept.

This is to ensure that your understanding is solid. (Sometimes explaining the concept to a friend is helpful in recognizing any weak points.)

Summary:

Thematic criticism developed in the 60s and 70s in an effort to define a clearly Canadian literature – a body of work that was not derived from European literature. The leading theorists were Doug Jones, John Moss, Margaret Atwood, and Northrop Frye. The first three were, coincidentally, students of Frye. The theory was later criticized for “cherry picking” works that supported their theories. This gave way to a more regional, rather than national, view of Canadian literature.

- Draw a concept map to see how concepts intercept or connect with each other.
- If old exams are available, use them to formulate possible questions.

Possible topic/essay: Describe the influence of thematic criticism on later types of Canadian literary theory.

- Write a brief outline in response to each question.

Thesis: Thematic criticism brought attention to the vast area occupied by Canadian society.

1. *An attempt to discover one overriding Canadian identity.*
2. *Close relationship of leading practitioners.*
3. *Accusations of “cherry picking”.*
4. *Development of regional literature, e.g., Kroetsch and Laurence as western writers.*

Conclusion: Thematic criticism led to the opening of a variety of Canadian literatures.

- At this point, it is useful to memorize relevant facts: authors, date, titles of work, etc.

Writing the exam

- Read all parts of the exam.

Are there different sections? For example, one section is short questions and answers while the second section is the essay. In this case, divide your time according to the marks allotted to each section. Is the entire exam one essay? In this case, the time should be divided among planning, writing and reviewing.

- If you are given a choice of topics, read all the questions carefully.

In order to understand the question fully, take note of key words: analyze, discuss, etc. Do not choose the one for which you know the most facts. Choose the one for which you have the most solid understanding of the concepts and theories involved.

- After choosing your question/topic:

Formulate a brief response to act as your thesis statement. Given the time constraints, it is usually acceptable to use the wording in the question to form your thesis.

- Take a few minutes to write an outline. Make sure all your points connect to your thesis. Despite the pressure of the time constraint, this will serve you well in the end.
- If possible, save a few minutes at the end to review: grammar, spelling, etc.

References:

[Resources | Department of Political Science | University of Washington](#)

[Writing exam essays | Writing and Communication Centre \(uwaterloo.ca\)](#)

[Writing Exam Essays | Students - Wilfrid Laurier University \(wlu.ca\)](#)

[Prepare for Essay Exams - Succeed at Exams - Guides at University of Guelph \(uoguelph.ca\)](#)

