Advice on Writing Essays & Examinations

1. Explain central concepts, restate major arguments, &c., in a way that would make them clear to someone who was not in the class. That would typically include defining terms and illustrating with examples. You should also pay particular attention to overall organization of longer answers.

The use of illustrative examples is important to a good answer.

Repeating the examples offered in the lecture is safe, but shows memory more than understanding.

Original examples will count for more, but of course only if they are good examples. In deciding which to use, remember the proverb, “Faint heart never won fair lady,” or if that proverb is not appropriate to our sensitive, globalized twenty-first century, think “либо грудь в крестах, либо голова в кустах.”

Making contrasts can be useful: “It is important to understand that when X says ‘Y,’ he means it in sense $Y_1$, not $Y_2$.”

2. Organize your answer:

Begin with statements like, “Understanding X requires that one understand three things,” or “X’s view on Y can be summed up in three theses.”

State arguments in a way that clearly distinguishes premises from conclusions.

3. In general, long answers will require explicit definitions, distinctions, & arguments.

4. Certain words commonly used on examinations are usually signs of a weaker answer.

“X deals with Y”—This generally means that the student recognizes that X has some relation with Y, but is not clear what that relation is. If you are tempted to write “deals with,” stop and ask yourself how exactly X is related to Y. If you can answer that question, do so (without saying

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1 Either a cross on your chest or your head in the bushes.
“deals with”). If you can’t, just put “deals with,” reconcile yourself to getting a C and move on.

“Also, …”—Using “also” as a connective often indicates lack of structure, as though the student thinks: “I know that there is something else I need to say here, but I don’t really know how it is connected to anything else I said, so I’ll just throw it in.” If you can figure out the connection, state it. If not, write “Also” and then see if you can make up the points with extraordinary clarity somewhere else on the examination.

Humor the grader by writing “think” when you are talking about someone’s ideas and “feel” when talking about someone’s emotions. So, for example, “I think that X is true and I feel angry when I hear someone say that X is false.”