**Writing Essay Exams** from *Teaching at the University of Virginia*, a publication of the Teaching Resource Center, University of Virginia, 2001, pg. 46-47.

* Make each question clearly define the task, avoiding the broad and ambiguous. Phrase the question specifically and give enough details to explain without giving too much away.
* Use specific wording when asking students to demonstrate their reasoning ability, as examples:
* *Comparing* – describe the similarities and differences between
* *Justifying* – which of the following alternatives would you favor and why?
* *Summarizing* – state the main points included in…
* *Generalizing* – state a set of principles that explain the following events.
* *Creating* – write a list of questions that should be answered before…
* *Applying* – using the principle of … as a guide, describe how to solve the following situation.
* Indicate the scope of the required answer by defining length in time or space or value in number of points.
* Remind students that essays must have a thesis, a main point clearly stated and coherently supported.
* Essay questions should measure students’ knowledge and reasoning ability, not opinions or attitudes. Instead of asking, “How do you think crime could be eliminated?” say, “Describe one proposed method for controlling crime and give four reasons why this method would be effective or ineffective.”
* Allow for *thought time* in planning exam length. For example, allow five minutes of thought time for an answer requiring fifteen minutes to write.
* Consider the relative value of shorter versus longer test items. Short-answer items are more specific, better define the task, and are easier to score. Longer essays, however, better evaluate students’ ability to integrate material or explain complex ideas.
* Before administering the test, develop a scoring key or guide that weights content, reasoning, and style. Tell students your expectations. Writing the key will help you spot confusing, ambiguous, or awkward questions; having the key as you read the first papers will save you from grading them too easily or harshly.