Advantages, Limitations, and Misconceptions of Essay Questions

Advantages of Essay Questions:
1. Assess higher-order or critical thinking skills.
2. Evaluate student thinking and reasoning.
3. Provide authentic experience.

Limitations of Essay Questions:
1. Assess a limited sample of the range of content.
2. Are difficult and time consuming to grade.
3. Provide practice in poor or unpolished writing.

Misconceptions about Essay questions
1. Assess higher-order or critical thinking skills regardless of how they are written.
2. Essay questions are easy to construct.
3. The use of essay questions eliminates the problem of guessing.
4. Essay questions benefit all students by placing emphasis on the importance of written communication skills.
5. Essay questions encourage students to prepare more thoroughly.

Checklist for Writing Essay Questions

☐ Could the content be better assessed by another method? Are you assessing higher order or critical thinking skills?

☐ Is the question aligned with the intended learning outcome?

☐ Is the essay question too long? Would it be better split into several short questions?

☐ Does the question contain a clear and delimited task and a specific problem situation (if necessary)?

☐ Is the question worded and structured in such a way that it will be clear to the students what they are expected to do?

☐ Is the task presented to students reasonable?

☐ If there is a problem situation included in the essay question, is it a novel situation?

☐ Do the students know the recommended time for completing their answer?

☐ Do the students know how many points the essay is worth?

☐ Have you avoided the use of optional questions?

☐ Have you written a model answer or an outline of major points that should be included in the answer? Is the model answer aligned with the intended learning outcome and the essay question?

☐ Did you have a person knowledgeable in the subject critically review the essay item for clarity and for alignment with the intended learning outcome and the model answer?

Adapted from: "PREPARING EFFECTIVE ESSAY QUESTIONS" by Reiner, Bothell, Sudweeks and Wood (2002)