For those of you who do not have a lot of experience writing answers to "essay" questions, here are some guidelines that you may find helpful in this class and others.

When answering an essay question, make sure that you write only as much as is necessary, no more, no less. This means that there is no point in incorporating excess information, padding, or redundancy into your answer. In fact, that approach is guaranteed to be a turn-off for whoever has to read through your homework or exam and at least several dozen others. Please be aware that we are prepared to take off points for inclusion of irrelevant information in an answer.

Given my (and your TA’s, and most other instructors') aversion to over-long answers and "brain dumps", here are some simple instructions on how to proceed:

1. Before you write anything, read the question carefully. Make sure you understand it completely before trying to compose an answer. Reread it multiple times if necessary. If there is something you don't understand, ask for clarification.

2. If there are any potentially ambiguous terms in the question and/or your answer, provide a definition of the term as it applies to your answer. Again, you may ask the TA or instructor for clarification.

3. It is often helpful to start your answer with a one-sentence (or part of a sentence) restatement of the question.

4. Write an answer that is well-organized, concise, and complete. Do not repeat information. Do not include irrelevant information. Do not address issues that are not part of the question asked.

5. If there are multiple parts to the question, answer each part separately, and make sure that each part is answered.

Here is a silly example to keep in mind as you compose your answers:

**Question:** What color is the sky?

**Answer:** The sky can be defined as the earth's atmosphere viewed from the ground, including the air and aggregations of water vapor, or clouds. [The first sentence defines a potentially ambiguous term and explains how it will be used for the purpose of answering the question]. The color of the sky depends on several different factors, including weather conditions and time of day. [The second sentence restates the question and sets up the organization of the rest of the answer]. When the sky is clear, it is blue during the day and dark blue or black at night. When there are clouds in the sky, their color during the day generally ranges from white to grey. When the sun is low in the sky at dawn or sunset, the clouds and sky are often various shades of red, pink, orange, or violet. On a cloudy night, the sky sometimes appears dark grey or pink from reflected light.
Comments: If I had answered "the sky is blue", that would have been an incomplete answer because the sky is not always blue, even if you do not include clouds in the definition of "sky". To answer this question with reasonable thoroughness required approximately 6 sentences. Once the term "sky" has been defined, everything in the answer deals with the color of the sky, not other related topics. For instance, I do not go into how clouds are formed, why a clear sky appears blue during the day, variations in day length according to season, a beautiful sunset I have seen, etc. I also do not make an exhaustive list of every factor that could possibly influence the perceived color of the sky, e.g., northern lights, smog, smoke from a volcanic eruption or forest fire, the searchlight beam from the local used-car lot, wearing my sunglasses, etc. Instead, I list the most commonly observed colors of what is commonly defined as the sky, and the circumstances under which they occur.