

2.13 Examination techniques

Why do exams?

Exams are one way of assessing whether or not you have learnt the ideas, facts and issues involved on your course, and that you are able to apply these to particular questions or tasks. Evidence of manipulation of this information is more important than simple repetition of facts and figures.

Not many people like doing exams, but they have been around for a long time, so they must be, at least to some extent, a good way of carrying out student assessment. They test how well you can think and whether you can work quickly and under pressure, which are both important skills to develop.

Preparation

The best preparation for exams is to attend all your lectures and seminars, do all your coursework conscientiously and read widely. If you do this, and try to really understand the ideas and issues involved in your course, then exams should not cause too many problems. Difficulties arise when you have not worked hard enough during the year and then try to “revise” (i.e. learn) your course materials in a few days or weeks at the end of the course. Make sure that you do any revision effectively; you can’t afford to waste time.

Your tutors want you to do well; they’re not trying to trick you or to make exams as difficult as they can. Bad results may reflect badly on them, on the department, and on the university as a whole. So listen carefully to what tutors say in lectures and seminars leading up to exams – they may drop hints as to what the exam may consist of. Try to find out which tutors are responsible for which exams or parts of an exam.

Make sure you’re clear which courses or modules are actually examined and what percentage of the course assessment is represented by the exam.

Find out as much as you can about the format of the exam, either by checking with your tutors or by looking at old exam papers. How long is it? How many questions have to be answered? What type of questions are asked? How much choice do you have? Do some questions carry more marks than others? What are the regulations on taking materials into the exam? The more informed you are, the less pressure you should feel on the actual day.

By using old exam papers as well as what you are told by tutors, try to predict likely topics and questions. Remember though that you are unlikely to be asked exactly the same question used in a previous exam; you must always read your actual exam questions carefully and make sure you answer that particular question (see Writing the Exam).

Practise analysing the questions and writing essay plans by looking at old exam questions. It is probably not a good idea, however, to actually write answers or even to look at model answers which may be available. Doing this may restrict your thinking and flexibility; as noted above, you must be responsive to the particular questions being asked on the exam paper. You must know your stuff, but have an open and flexible mind as to how this material should be used in the exam.

Get together with colleagues to discuss possible topics, questions and answers.

Don't stay up late revising the night before the exam: if you don't know it by then you probably never will. Much better to have an early night so you are fresh in the morning. On actual exam day, you should obviously make sure you arrive in plenty of time and have a good supply of pens, pencils, rubbers etc. Check about taking in refreshments, and make sure that mobile phone is switched off!

Writing the exam

Don't start writing straight away! If you are given time before the exam to read through the paper, make sure you use this effectively. If you are not allowed this extra time, you still need to spend a few minutes carefully checking:

- the instructions. How many questions do you have to answer? (There's always someone who tries to answer too many!) Is mark weighting indicated? Where should the answers be written?
- the questions. Scan them for ones you feel more confident with. Maybe jot down a few initial thoughts to help you make the final decision on which ones to answer. Don't just focus on the main topic.

Analyse the questions carefully. You must answer the actual question set. It's a very common mistake to zoom in on the general topic and start writing everything you know about it or to start answering another related question which may have been included in a past paper. Spend time looking very closely at the question:

- what's the instruction? (discuss? evaluate? compare? outline?)
- what aspects of the topic are you being asked to consider? (dates? places? people? other key words?)
- how many sections are there in the question? A 'question' may often in fact be two or three questions. If so, the 'discussion/analysis' parts will be more important than the 'description' parts, so make sure you spend more time on these.

See Guide 1.11: Understanding questions

Work out the structure of your answer. Spend time working on a fairly detailed plan. Don't panic if you see everyone around you writing away: a good plan will make writing your answer much easier; a well structured answer will usually get

higher marks, and if you are unable to finish an answer, but your plan indicates clearly what you were intending to write, you may in some circumstances get credit for this. Remember the basic structure: introduction; clear paragraphs or sections, each devoted to one new idea; conclusion or summary. And when you're writing your answer, keep referring back to your plan, and keep asking yourself if you're answering the question. Your answer must be 100% relevant to the question – exam answers are short, and there is absolutely no room for waffle or inconsequential information.

See our other guides on writing essays and essay structure.

If English is not your first language don't worry. Your tutors realise this and will make concessions, although they do of course need to understand what you've written, and some courses do also have higher standards of the English they expect. It's the ideas that are the most important thing.

Don't worry about making references. A exam answer is different to a coursework answer, and you are usually not expected to try and learn lots of reference details, especially dates and page numbers. Some references to authors may be necessary however. Similarly, it may not be necessary to try and learn lots of detailed information such as exact dates and figures. A university level exam is not simply a memory test.

Timing is important. If you have three questions to answer in three hours, don't spend an hour and a half on the first question. Divide up your time equally, allowing for question analysis and planning, and also for checking what you've written when you've finished for relevance, structure, cohesion, accuracy etc. You may want to answer the question you're most comfortable with first, partly maybe to help settle your nerves, but don't get carried away with it – keep your eye on the clock.

What will please the examiner:

- the fact that you have answered the question
- evidence that you have applied what you have learnt during the module
- you have answered all the questions
- a well-structured, coherent piece of writing, not in note-form
- legible handwriting. If your handwriting is really terrible, get some help and practice.

After the exam

No post-mortems. You're more likely to depress yourself than anything else. There's nothing you can do about it now. Go and relax and then prepare for your next exam if you have one.

If you have to resit try to find out as much as possible from your tutors why you did badly, and concentrate on improving that area. Was it because of misunderstanding of the questions? Irrelevant or short answers? Problems with English? Most tutors will be happy to help you (remember, they want you to do well!