



# Doing better in exams

## The lead-up to the exam

- Start your study program early and build gradually.
- Exam preparation must build on regular work throughout the semester. If you are well-prepared, you won't be as nervous and you will get better marks.
- Make notes throughout the semester for all the areas you will be tested on in the exam. Find out from your lecturer what the exam will cover as soon as possible.
- Remember, you will not have time to start learning neglected areas during the study break and the first exam. There will be lots of other assignments and exams around the same time to take care of.
- Don't miss final lectures close to exams. Lecturers may try to cover points in the exam that they missed out earlier. If they review the course, it's likely to cover points in the exam!
- Maintain a healthy lifestyle by getting enough sleep, good nutrition, exercise, some personal "down" time, and a reasonable amount of social interaction.
- Get to know the exam format.
- Find out as much information as possible about the exam early in the semester.
- Find out if the format will be multiple choice, short answer, essay, or a mixture of these (see below).

## Make up a revision timetable

- When you know your exam dates, draw up a revision timetable to cover the entire assignment / exam period.
- Write out a list of the topics in each course that you need to revise, and work out how much time you will have to revise each of them. Do not over-revise one topic at the expense of another.
- The late preparation stage should be spent
  - reviewing your notes
  - practising exam-style answers
  - extending some of the knowledge already gained through the course

## Make master summaries

- Many students review notes by making master summaries, that is, they condense their notes into key points that can be quickly reviewed.
- Actively rework material by making mind-maps and diagrams.
- Mnemonics can help you memorize key points.
- Memorisation should be restricted to lists of key points and standard definitions. Do not memorise chunks of text (or whole essays!) to reproduce in exams. You should be prepared to comment on, expand, apply or give examples for your key points.

## Before the exam

- Before you go to bed on the night before the exam, make sure to collect together anything that you will need for the exam – pen, pencil, ruler, eraser, calculator, etc.
- Double check the date and time of the exam and the location. Make sure you are absolutely certain of the date, time and location of the examination. Visit the building in advance, if you are unsure where it is.
- The night before the exam, do some revision; do not stay up late trying to learn new material. A late night cramming session is a sign of poor preparation. What you learn in cramming will probably be offset by your tiredness the next day.
- Plan to arrive comfortably early, definitely not right on time. Find a convenient place near the exam location where you can sit, calm your thoughts and review your notes.

## In the exam

- Don't talk to friends about the exam material just before going into the exam.
- As the papers are distributed, calm yourself down by closing your eyes and taking some slow deep breaths.
- Make sure to read carefully any instructions on the top page of the exam.
- As you work on the exam, focus only on the exam, not on what other students are doing.
- If the exam is more difficult than you anticipated, try to focus and just do your best at that point. It might be enough to get you through, even with a reasonable grade!
- Use the reading time (if any) to study the questions carefully. Note which questions are compulsory, and which are optional.
- Look at every page of the exam paper. Even if there is no reading time, spend the first few minutes looking through the paper.
- Calculate how much time you can spend on each section. One way to do this is to divide the number of minutes in the exam (less time for planning and checking) by the total number of

marks allotted to each question. This will give you a guide to how long you should spend on each question.

- If you have worked out your writing speed under pressure, you will know how many words you can write. Many students overestimate how much they can write in a given time, go way over time on one question and then lose marks because they do not finish the exam in the given time.
- If you feel very anxious or even panicky in the test, take a few minutes time out and calm yourself down. Stretch your arms and legs and then relax them again. Do this a couple of times. Take a few slow deep breaths. Do some positive internal self-talk; say to yourself “I will be OK, I can do this.” Then take your time and get back into the questions.
- Do not skip questions if you are running out of time. It is easier to get the first 50% of marks on a question than the second 50%, so ten half-answered questions will probably get a higher mark than five fully answered and five unanswered questions.
- When the exam is over, treat yourself. If you do not have any other commitments, maybe you can go to see a movie with a friend. If you have other exams to study for, you may have to postpone a larger treat, but maybe a half hour for a coffee with a friend or a quick swim in the pool will be the pick-up that you need.

## Question Types

### Multiple choice questions

- You must prepare broadly as these questions usually test whole course.
- Can only be used where there is a clear “correct” or “best” answer.
- Simply understanding course content is usually insufficient to recognise correct answers – study as if for short answer / problem type questions (i.e. recall and apply knowledge).
- Fast pace – usually one minute per question.
- Longer, more detailed, more qualified, “in the middle” answers are more likely to be correct than shorter, less detailed, extreme or absolute answers.
- Allow sufficient time for transferring answers to answer sheet.
- Don’t get out of sequence.

### Short answer questions

- Can be from one word to several paragraphs.
- Generally focus on understanding / recall / application of course content (“regurgitation”).
- Longer short answer questions may look like mini-essays, but will be scored for recall of key points.
- Often one mark per key information point.

## Problem type questions

- Focus on application of knowledge to specific cases.
- Practice will help you to recognise each kind of problem.

## Essay

- Used where there is not one single, clear answer to a question – student’s interpretation is important. (“Discuss” still means you have to develop a point of view.)
- Usually you don’t have to prepare whole course.
- Many students lose marks for “not answering the question” – misreading or ignoring key parts of a question. Examine the question for its specific focus.
- Unlike an essay written at home, referencing can be minimal or non-existent.
- Introductions/conclusions should be briefer than home written essays.
- Gain marks for
  - a clear point of view
  - evidence to support point of view
  - ability to deal with conflicting evidence
  - organisation into paragraphs, each with a clear focus.
- Lose marks for
  - waffle
  - repetition
- Practise writing under pressure to get a feeling for how much you can write in a certain time (e.g. a page in six minutes).
- Don’t go over time in one essay and hope to make it up later.
- Beware of trying to “pick” the exam questions. There may, however, be some value in getting to know the particular focus of the lecturer setting the exam.