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Approaching Exams



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Introduction

This Guide concentrates on some of the common types of exam that students may encounter, and how to approach them, and also getting the best out of yourself on the day.

More advice on revision is available in our Revision Study Basics Guide, and it is helpful to read both in conjunction.

Preparing for the exam

Make sure you know where and when the exam is well in advance, and if you are commuting to the exam, make sure you are sure of your transport arrangements (and any possible delays).

The night before the exam, read through your summarized notes, but try not to read much more. This isn't really the time for trying to learn anything new! Clearly, do not plan a big night out tonight!

Pack your bag with the things you will need: pens, pencils, glasses, medicines (if needed), University I.D. card, and any other equipment you may need. You can take in bottled water but nothing else unless you have a medical reason for doing so. You will not be able to sit the exam without your I.D. card.

Make sure you get up in plenty of time to eat breakfast, particularly if it is a morning exam. Think about whether it is helpful or not to take any notes with you to read before the exam. Some people find this helpful, as they know they have checked everything, for others this only brings on a feeling that they have missed something vital.

Make sure you get to campus in good time, so you know you are in reach of the building and ensure you know where the room is. However, it is probably best not to stand outside the room until 10 to 15 minutes before the exam, as listening to others will probably make you nervous.

You should be told when you can enter the room. Leave your bag and coat at the designated place (usually the back of the room) and find your place. Take your equipment and your I.D. card with you.

Do not take your mobile phone to the desk with you. Leave it switched off in your bag. It will be safe.

Sit and await the invigilator's instructions. They will tell you things about timing, health and safety, and what you should have at your desks.

Go in with a game plan...

Your tutors will not (usually) tell you exactly what questions will be set in the exam. However, generally you will know in advance what kind of exam you will be sitting, whether you have any choice in what questions you answer and often how

many questions you will be expected to answer. This means you should be able to plan in advance how you are going to tackle and time your exam. It is really important you plan your time accordingly. How you plan might depend a little on what type of exam you are sitting. For all of them, however, you need to build in time for reading instructions, reading questions and checking through answers at the end!

Multiple Choice Question Exams: These are types of exams in which you are usually expected to answer all of the questions. If you know how many questions you will be asked, then work out roughly how long you have for each question, and try and stick to this in the exam.

Maths Based Exams: Again, you may be required to answer all of the questions. Try and get an overall idea of how long you will have per mark or per question, allocate time to questions accordingly and stick to this plan.

Short Answer Exams: It is important to know the structure of a short answer paper, as they can vary. You may have a long paper in which you have to answer all of the questions, or you may have 'sets' of related short questions in which you choose

which sets of question you will answer. In either case, you need to be familiar with how many marks may be attached to the questions or any sections to the exam and have a plan for how to will portion your time out accordingly.

Essay Based Exams: These are exams in which you only answer two or three questions, but in depth. Not only do you need to portion your time according to how many marks each question is worth, but you also need to build in time for analysing the question and properly planning your answer.

You may turn over your paper and begin...

Before you write anything, you need to do the following:

1. Take a deep breath.
2. **Read the instructions very carefully.** Make sure you know exactly what you are expected to do. Underline the important facts if this helps.
3. Calculate how long you have for each part of the exam.

4. Then, read each question on the whole paper carefully and make any choices that are open to you...

Remember, you do not have to tackle the questions for any type of exam in the order they appear. Just make sure that you label each answer with the correct number so that the examiner knows which one it is. Some students like to work on the one they are happiest with first, others feel that tackling the most difficult first is best. It is up to you which way to do this.

There are some general pointers to bear in mind depending on what type of exam you are sitting:

Multiple Choice Exams: Don't be tempted to rush through them, even if you are confident. Any odd phrasing can change the meaning of a question, so make sure you read them carefully. If you are struggling with a question, try working through the possible answers by a process of elimination. Discount any obviously wrong answers, thus leaving yourself with a smaller number of possible right answers.

Maths Based Exams: Try not to get caught up in a tricky problem and thus leave yourself short of

time for the last questions. You can always come back to difficult questions if you have time at the end. Show your working out as far as possible, as if you get some of it right, your tutors may be able to award you some marks. If you are unsure about any of your answers and have time, try working them out again from scratch without looking at your original answer, to see if you get the same answer twice. For complicated, worded problems, read very carefully and make sure you know what the question is asking you to find out. It may help to write some brief notes to help you determine what stages you need to go through to reach the answer, and writing down exactly what you have found at each stage will help you if you get lost partway through a long question.

Short Answer Exams: These require structured answers which are to the point. The amount of marks allocated per question should give you an indication of how much depth each answer requires. In exams which have 'sets' of short answer questions, you may find that the questions build on one another, and it may be worth thinking about how they link together.

Essay Based Exams: These can be the most challenging type of exam answers to plan and

execute. It is important to not just start writing! Give yourself time to plan your answer, and plan using the time you have, rather than giving yourself an arbitrary amount to write. For example, if you have fifty minutes for an answer, you may spend ten on the introduction, ten on the conclusion, seven to eight minutes on your three main points and just under ten minutes checking it through at the end.

Further Advice on Essay Based Exams

Just like your coursework essays, an exam essay should have a clear structure, pay close attention to the question set and have a proper argument. It is worth thinking what each section of the essay should do, as it is easy to lose track under pressure.

1. Introduction

This should give the examiner an idea of what you will be covering in your answer, and the direction your argument will take.

If you are able to lay out your argument in your introduction, this will help you with the main body. Here is something that you could begin with:

This question requires that consideration is given in the following areas: firstly,....., secondly,....., and thirdly,..... A conclusion can then be drawn, to determine whether..... (main argument).

It is worth keeping it simple in an exam. You are mainly being marked for your knowledge on a subject and ability to answer a question, not on how many adjectives and technical words you can squeeze in, or how much extraneous detail you've remembered.

2. Main Body

The essay should now follow your introduction and plan. Most importantly, it should answer the question using your knowledge of the key themes, ideas, arguments etc. on the subject and that you can talk about them in your own words. Illustrate and support your argument properly by referring to authors who deal with the subject. You can quote facts if they are relevant and relate directly to the question. Although tutors don't expect the same

level of referencing as in a coursework essay, do try to remember the names of authors and dates as closely as you can.

As you proceed, keep the question in mind at all times. It is so easy to drift off topic and lose your way. Examiners will penalise you if you do this. When you have finished your first paragraph, pause and ask yourself “Does it address the question? Am I doing what I set out to do in the introduction?” If you can answer “yes,” then you are doing OK. Repeat this after each subsequent paragraph too.

3. Conclusion

You should always try to conclude your essay properly. It needs to summarise the points you have made, and must give some kind of answer to the original question. Open it up with a transitional phrase such as “In conclusion,” or “It is clear, therefore, that...”. Even if the rest of the essay is unfinished, try to write a good conclusion. It will give your piece a strong finish and can include a brief overview of how your unfinished points fit into the piece overall.

What can go wrong?

Simple mistakes will usually not result in a fail, but your marks will suffer. Here are some things to avoid:

1. Failure to follow the correct instructions about the number of questions to answer, or writing short answers instead of long ones.
2. Failure to read questions properly and understand what is being asked.
3. Running out of time. If you spend all of the time writing two answers and should have answered three, then you lose 33% of the mark straight away.
4. Answering with common sense answers and skirting around an issue rather than using course material backed up with solid examples that illustrate your argument sufficiently.
5. Writing an answer without planning first can lead to weakly structured and disorganised writing.
6. Scruffy, untidy handwriting is difficult for the examiner to read. They can usually decipher most handwriting, but try to make yours legible.

7. Bad spelling and grammar can be penalised in essays if it is widespread.
8. Failing to adapt the material revised to the exact question set and veering off-topic.
9. Failure to put your name or student number (as instructed) on the front of the paper and numbering your answers incorrectly!

OK, the exam is over, so that is it?

Try not to listen too much to how other people felt they did! If you feel you made mistakes in content, then worrying about them now cannot change the result. If you feel your approach was wrong, for example you ran out of time, it worth thinking about how you can rectify that for the next exam.

When you receive your results, you may not be given your script back, so it could be difficult to see where you went wrong or right. If you have any problems with your result, make an appointment and see your module tutor, who may be able to give you some feedback.

Appendix

Words you may encounter in an exam question

Compare	Look for similarities and differences between two given themes. You could reach a conclusion about which is preferable and justify this clearly.
Contrast	Set two things in opposition to bring out the differences.
Criticise	Judge the merits of a theory or opinion on a given subject. Always back this up with evidence or reasoning.
Describe	Give a detailed account of something.
Discuss	Explain an issue and then give both sides and consider any implications.
Explain	Give details about why and how something is.

- Evaluate** Make an appraisal of the value or effectiveness of something. Has it proved useful to the discussion or argument?
- Justify** Show grounds for decisions or conclusions you have made and answer any objections likely to be made about them.
- Outline** Give the main features or general principles of a subject, omitting minor details and emphasizing structure and arrangement.
- Summarise** Give a concise, clear explanation of something, presenting the chief factors and leaving out minor details.

Updated July 2019