

Exams summary

Introduction

Purpose

In addition to understanding exam types, two key factors in dealing with exams are understanding your personal learning style and managing exam anxiety.

Learning styles

Visual learners

Approximately two thirds of students are visual learners. They learn best when they can see or visualise their information. This could be in the form of notes, diagrams, symbols, pictures, and so on..

Auditory learners

About 30 per cent of students are auditory learners. They learn best by taking their cues from sounds. Information becomes more meaningful for them when it is spoken out loud.

Kinaesthetic learners

Kinaesthetic learners (about 5 per cent of students) learn best through using touch, movement and space. Learning most often occurs through imitation and practice. Nobody is exclusively a visual, auditory or kinaesthetic learner. However, one style of learning will tend to predominate.

Most memory techniques are written for visual learners. If you learn best through listening or using kinaesthetic style you will need to adjust your techniques to suit. For example, recording important information onto a tape and listening to it repeatedly.

Types of exams

Exams can take a variety of forms and lecturers may use a combination in a single exam.

- **Multiple choice** - This means that the answer to the question must be chosen from a range of possible answers, given to you as part of the question. You will be asked to choose the answer that you think best fits the question. Be sure to read your instructions to candidates section carefully.
- **Short answer** - The length of a short answer is quite flexible. It could range from one word, to a phrase, to a sentence or to a paragraph. Whatever the required format of the short answer, you will almost certainly be tested on memory (i.e. your ability to recall specific information) rather than interpretation. The examiner will be expecting you to produce discrete pieces of information.
- **Essays** - Essay answers in exams differ from those done during the semester in two respects:
 - You are not expected to provide much referencing.
 - You do not need to provide a bibliography/reference list.

Usually, exam essays will require you to explore the major themes of your subject. The lecture topics and (especially) the tutorial topics will give you a reasonable, but not foolproof, guide to the main issues. In particular, the tutorial questions offer some idea of how exam questions might be structured. You can also look at past exam papers to get some idea of both the structure and content of questions asked in the past.

- **Practical** - Practical exams in science disciplines aim to examine your ability to perform specific tasks in which you apply your knowledge of the subject to solving specific practical problems or performing specific tasks. The best way to prepare is to practice what you will be required to do in the exam. Work through the various laboratory exercises that you did during the semester.
- **Open book** - An open book exam means that you can take your notes, specified books and other references into the exam room. This will probably vary with the subject and the lecturer concerned. Open book exams can be a trap because you might think that you do not need to concentrate on revising the subject to the same extent as a closed book exam. There are three main areas that your preparation must encompass:
 - Prepare properly: You must prepare as if you were sitting a closed book exam.
 - Know your subject: If you do not know your subject matter when you are actually doing the exam, the notes and books that you take in with you will be of little help.
 - Making revision notes:
- **Problem solving** - Examinations in mathematics, physics, accounting, economics, and similar sorts of subjects commonly use this format of question. The key to success here is to have a thorough understanding of the theories and concepts that give rise to the various formulae that you need to use. The best way to do this is to work through lots of problems similar to the sorts of ones that you are likely to get in the exam.
- **Oral** - In an oral examination, the questions are delivered and answered on a face to face basis. In most undergraduate areas, except for languages and medicine, oral examinations are fairly rare. Revising for an oral examination will require you to do much the same sort of preparation as for objective, short answer, and essay modes of examination.

Preparing for exams

Plan

Preparation reduces anxiety, so avoid last minute cramming. Schedule weekly revision time and try to use a variety of revision techniques such as usually visuals and writing summaries. Remember to balance your personal life so you remain calm and healthy. In the lead up to the exam, a revision plan can help. This is a more detailed schedule of what topics to focus on and how long to spend on each. You may be able to find past papers or get advice from the lecturer on what to focus on.

Revise

The process of revision is cumulative, which means your knowledge and understanding is constantly developing. For this reason, adopting a series of regular short study sessions is more effective than one long one. Use the same principles for revision sessions as you would for any study session – set realistic times, take regular breaks, be aware of your preferred study space and habits and combine a variety of study activities to maintain concentration.

Sit

On the day of the exam, preparation remains the key. Ensure you get a good night's sleep, eat healthily, and check you have everything you need for the exam. Give yourself plenty of time to reach the exam centre.

When sitting an exam make effective use of your reading time. All exams will have a designated period known as reading time. Usually this will be ten minutes, but in some units (e.g. law) reading time can extend beyond that to twenty or thirty minutes.

Controlling stress and anxiety

- **Dealing with exam anxiety** - It is normal and natural to feel some stress associated with tests and exams. However, that stress should not prevent you from studying or thinking clearly in the test or exam. Try to identify what you are stressed about and adopt strategies to remain calm. Remember that preparation will help reduce stress.
- **One the way to the exam** – Remember that exams are designed to give you an opportunity to show what you have learned rather than to deliberately fail you. You are not expected to know everything about your topic so you don't have to be perfect.
- **Waiting for the paper** - This is a potentially risky time because you will be surrounded by many other students feeling just like you - anxious and stressed out and other students who seem to be very relaxed and light-hearted. It is best to avoid discussing possible exam questions and how much you studied because this can lead to more anxiety. Focus your thoughts on what you are about to do.
- **During the exam** – Generally, you will be too focused to worry about time passing, but if you find you are losing focus, relax by taking several deep breaths and slowly letting them out. Decide if spending more time on one question is the most effective strategy or whether you should move on.
- **Managing stress** - Feeling stressed is one of the most common student complaints at university. Stress is a normal reaction to unexpected events in everyday life. If you understand what is causing you stress, you can learn to manage your symptoms. Managing your time, staying healthy, taking exercise and practising relaxation are all effective ways to manage stress.