

Effective Exam Techniques

Preparing thoroughly, knowing subject content and managing pre-exam anxiety and stress are all vital in the lead-up to the exam period. It still however, does not guarantee success in an exam situation. Remembering some basic techniques while sitting the exam can make all the difference between having your hard work rewarded or not. The following tips are a reminder that technique matters!

Just before the exam

- Try not to study late the night before. Appropriate amounts of sleep can aid the retention process. You can't concentrate for an exam length if you haven't rested enough beforehand!
- Eat enough food to keep you going on the day. Too much or too little can negatively affect your performance. Research shows the value of a sensible breakfast (not just caffeine or nicotine!).
- Take time to manage the last-minute stress and anxiety using relaxation techniques. Healthy amounts of both can be very beneficial and are designed to keep us focused and functional.
- If you are ill or unable to sit the exam on the day, you need to follow the appropriate protocol (contact the Exams Office within the Student Centre). Do not just assume someone will follow you up. It is better not to attend an exam at all rather than have to leave part way through it due to illness.
- Check again the location and time of the exam. These basic details so often get confused under stress!
- Prepare all you need to take into the exam in plenty of time beforehand. Be clear what is allowed and remember your student card (you can't sit without this). If you forget your student card you will have to visit the Student Centre for a replacement before you will be allowed to sit the exam. Having your own clock/watch is worthwhile.
- Revise the 'big picture'. Use your summaries to condense the entire unit into no more than a page of points and go over this

before you enter the exam room. Reading chapters of textbooks will not help at this stage! Don't bother taking a bag of books with you to the exam room unless it is an 'open book' exam.

- Be on time for the exam. Not too early – that achieves nothing except heightened anxiety! Not too late – that achieves nothing except missing valuable minutes.
- Think about where you would prefer to sit in the exam room – away from distractions (front row?), near natural light? ventilation? temperature conditions (draughts etc)?

Reading time

- Reading time for examinations is 15 minutes and you are allowed to write notes during this time. This means that you may write on your examination question papers or booklets during reading time if you wish.
- Start with the basic details – is this the exam paper you are meant to sit? Does it have all pages? Are both sides of the paper used for questions? Is it the expected length of time? ALWAYS CHECK!
- Read the instructions! Make sure you are clear how many sections of the paper are required to be answered and how many answers for each section.
- Clarify any instructions for individual sections of the paper.
- Clarify the weight of the questions. Which are worth the most? Allocate the most time to these.
- Only NOW is it appropriate to start reading the questions in more detail. Start selecting your preference of questions for each section if you have a choice. Good revision and preparation would allow you to answer most questions on your preferred subjects as well as having an 'emergency' subject just in case. Remember the exam is designed to test what you know, not what you do not know!

- Determine your priority of questions. Which will you start with? (It doesn't necessarily have to be in the order of the paper unless specifically requested). Usually starting with your most confident answer helps to settle into a writing/thinking pattern.
- Re-check your allocated times for each section/question. Make sure you factor in at least 5 mins at the end of the time period to gather and re-check the entire answer paper.
- Take a moment to stop, relax your muscle tension, focus on your first section/question and prepare to write.

Working time

- **THINK MORE, WRITE LESS!** Marks are not given just to fill empty pages! A well-constructed answer using only the relevant facts is far more valuable in the eyes of examiners. Longer answers (for example, essays) need to be planned before you start to write. Five minutes of thinking could save four pages of waffle!
- Answer the question in the format requested. An essay format is not the same as a short answer format. Multiple-choice questions may require an answer template. Make sure the question numbers correspond to your answer numbers (especially if you miss or skip a question).
- Assign a rough working page in your exam answer booklet or paper. Do your planning on this page or record facts you do not want to forget here. You can cross it out later or even refer to it in case you run short of time. Sometimes the working out can be as important as the end result.
- Ensure your writing is legible. Relaxing your hand/wrist/forearm muscles regularly through the exam can help to achieve this. Take time to check your answer for basic grammar and spelling. It doesn't need to be perfect, just functional.
- Standard referencing techniques are generally not required in exam conditions.
- Do not make the mistake of spending too much time on your preferred questions. Remember that it is a lot harder to get a better mark than it is to get a basic pass for a question. The time it takes to get a high distinction mark on a particular question at

the expense of other questions, may be better spent getting pass/credit marks on the other questions. This may give you a better overall mark on the paper.

- Stick to your allocated time for a question. Failing to do this can ruin your whole exam! Come back to a question if you have unexpected time at the end of the exam.
- Usually memory 'blocks' have to do with levels of anxiety. Take a few moments to relax using a rehearsed method. If you cannot remember revised information, try to skip to another question that you can remember. This can allow you to relax a little and information may be more easily recalled. Jot it down on your rough working page so you don't forget it again. If nothing seems to come back, do not panic! Break the anxious cycle by focusing on your breathing, stretching, even asking to go to the bathroom. Use positive coping statements – "This will come back to me", works much better than, "You idiot! You always forget vital information!"

Finishing strong

- Never leave an exam early! There is always more you can plan, add, check, remember. This may be your one shot at impressing the examiner. Every minute counts.
- When possible use the five minutes you allocated for the end of the exam to check over your answers, numbering of questions and compiling of papers.
- Make sure your appropriate details (ID number/name) are where they should be on the answer booklets/templates.
- Collect your personal things and leave after being told to finish. Exam question papers cannot be taken out of the room – they should be put inside the cover of the top answer booklet.
- Try to avoid immediate, lengthy after exam 'debriefs'. This may be an appropriate learning exercise later on but usually you will have more than one exam to sit. Try to put this one aside and focus on the next. There is nothing you can do about it now!
- Remember to smile! After all it is just one exam. Remind yourself that you can get better with practice!

Lifting my exam game

Improving exam technique takes time. Do not expect to get it right first up. Experienced students usually recall that it took them many exams and sometimes several years of undergraduate experience before their exam techniques improved. Reflect on your exam process after each examination period and try to isolate the things you did well and the things you would like to improve.

Need more help?

Learning to manage examinations is a process that takes practice. Other helpful resources to improve your practice include:

- Talking with tutors and lecturers.
- Downloading the detailed fact sheets for each of the listed topics
from: www.utas.edu.au/students/fact-sheets
- Attending workshops on exam management through the semester. For details go to: www.utas.edu.au/student-learning/workshops
- Accessing online resources at: www.utas.edu.au/student-learning/learning-resources
- Talking with other students in your faculty, for example mentors.

Remember that exams can be a fulfilling and rewarding form of assessment. A commitment to practising and improving your techniques goes a long way to ensuring that this could be the case for you!