

Exams and tests: tips for studying and answering questions

Find out about the test or the exam

- Check with your tutor about the format of the exam – will you be required to write essay answers or short paragraphs, or will the questions be in the form of multiple choice?
- How long is the test or exam?
- How many questions will you have to answer?
- Will you have to answer all the questions or will there be a choice?
- What proportion of the total course mark is represented by this exam or test?

Find out what to revise by:

- Looking at past exam papers, if these are available – but remember that if the course has been revised, they may be misleading
- Reading all the emails and posts from your tutor – there may be tips there
- Looking at class handouts, readings, notes and references – what are the main topics you have studied during your course?
- Checking previous assignments
- Asking your tutor what content knowledge you will need to know
- When you have done all this, make a list of possible questions / topics which could be included in the exam

Plan the revision process

- Use a diary or timetable to plan what you have to do
- Sort out the topics you need to study and plan to give time to each, but think about which topics you may need extra time for (for example, because you find them difficult or because they are so central to the course)
- Plan to revise at the times of the day which suit you best – are you a morning person or a night owl?

Revising

- Sort your notes into topics, read them carefully and underline or highlight the key points
- Write model answers to your questions
- Summarise these answers, using key words – this helps you to learn and reduces the amount of material you have to remember
 - Start by deciding on the main idea for each paragraph
 - Rewrite the main idea in your own words – keep it to a short sentence
 - Then write a few key words (the supporting details) under each main idea

- You will now have a summarised model answer which is easy to learn
- Being able to explain something in your own words is the only way to be sure you really understand it and know it well
- Practise writing your answers – most of us write very little nowadays so sitting down and writing very quickly and non-stop for an hour or hours (as you must do during an exam) can be very tiring. Each time you write your answer, you learn it better
- Make sure you use a pen which suits you – some are more comfortable than others and your hand may get very tired
- Find ways to learn which suit your particular learning style
 - Read aloud, listening carefully to what you say. Then repeat without using your notes and see how much you remember. Check for accuracy and repeat as many times as necessary
 - Post-its – stick post-its or posters up in appropriate places where you cannot miss them – review the information each time you look at it
 - Use index cards to record your summarised answers to questions – carry the cards with you and test yourself when you have a spare moment – for example, waiting in a queue, while getting dressed, during the TV ads!
 - Study with a friend or with a group – bounce ideas off one another, help each with difficult concepts, motivate each other, try teaching each other (a great way to learn), quiz each other
 - Remember key terms and concepts with visual and diagrams, or with mnemonics

The day before the exam

- Check the start time for the exam and the location. Make sure you know how to get there
- Make sure you have all the equipment you need – any technical equipment which is permitted, several pens of the type you prefer, pencils, watch, water, etc.
- Eat and sleep well

Sitting the exam or test

- Do not try to study on exam day
- Get to the venue early and wait in a quiet area
- Read the instructions carefully. You may get extra reading time before the official start of the exam
- Read all the questions carefully and make sure you understand what the examiner wants. You can present a well-written and factually correct answer but if it doesn't answer the question, you will not get a good mark! Many questions will expect you to apply what you know in order to solve a problem, rather than just list a lot of facts
- Check how many marks there are for each question and work out how much time you need to spend on each

- If there is a choice of questions, make your choices. Decide which order you will answer the questions – it is a good idea to do the ones you feel most comfortable with first, to give yourself confidence to tackle more difficult ones, and to get high marks for the topics you know best
- Briefly plan your answers before you start writing – adapt the information you have learned to fit the question which has been asked – it may not be exactly what you expected and it is essential that you answer the question in the exam, not the question you would like to have been there!
- Attempt all the questions you have to answer, even if you think you don't know anything. You may know enough to get a few marks, which will always help in achieving a pass mark overall
- Keep an eye on the time. If you start to run out of time, write down your main points in list form as you will then still earn some marks for the question
- If you have spare time at the end, check your work thoroughly

After the exam

- Try not to stress too much if you found the exam difficult – don't dissect the questions and answers with your fellow students as this may make you feel worse
- Give yourself a treat – go to a movie, have a meal out, spend time with a friend or family member.

Adapted from:

Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology. Exams and tests: preparation and techniques. Retrieved from

http://library.cpit.ac.nz/learning_services/learning_and_study_resources/test_and_exam_skills, 7 June 2013.

Open Polytechnic. Studying for exams: tips, techniques and strategies. Retrieved from

<http://www.openpolytechnic.ac.nz/study-with-us/study-resources-for-students/exams/how-to-study-for-exams/studying-for-exams-tips-techniques-and-strategies/>, 7 June 2013.

Open Polytechnic. Tips for answering exam questions. Retrieved from

<http://www.openpolytechnic.ac.nz/study-with-us/study-resources-for-students/exams/tips-for-answering-exam-questions/>, 7 June 2013.

Open Polytechnic. What to do the day before your exam. Retrieved from

<http://www.openpolytechnic.ac.nz/study-with-us/study-resources-for-students/exams/what-to-do-the-day-before-your-exam/>, 7 June 2013.

Further reading (available from TPP Library)

Dawson, C. (2004). *Learning how to study again*. Oxford: HowToBooks. Chapter 16: Passing your exams.

Gutman, E. (2004). *Study skills*. Bondi Junction, N.S.W: Evian Gutman & Kidz Korner. Chapter 5: Writing notes and revising; Chapter 6: Memory-retention techniques; Chapter 7: How to approach essays, questions and exams; Chapter 8: The day of the exam; Chapter 9: The exam.

Magdalinski, T. (2013). *Study skills for sports studies*. Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge. Chapter 13: Tests, quizzes, mid-terms and finals: preparing for and writing exams.

Rozakis, L. (2003). *Test taking strategies and study skills for the utterly confused*. McGraw-Hill.

Studying & test taking made incredibly easy. (2000). Springhouse Corporation.

Turner, K., Ireland, L., Krenus, B., & Pointon, L. (2008). *Essential academic skills*. Rev. ed. Melbourne: Oxford University Press. Chapter 10: Examinations.

You might also find the following link helpful:

<http://owll.massey.ac.nz/pdf/exam-survival-guide.pdf> - Massey University. *Exam survival guide*.