

Exam techniques

Academic Tip Sheet



This academic tip sheet:

- explains what you should do on the day of the exam;
- explains what you should do during the exam; and
- looks at what to do when things go wrong.

What should you do on the day of the exam?

- In the morning eat something, but not so much it makes you feel sleepy.
- Wear a watch in case there is no clock in the exam room.
- Make sure you allow plenty of time for things like traffic jams or parking problems, but don't arrive so early that you make yourself nervous.
- Quietly read through your notes. If you can, avoid talking to others about the

exam. Statements such as "... there's bound to be a question on ...", "... most people failed this subject last year ..." are all guaranteed to panic you.

Remember: You are well prepared, have revised all the relevant sections thoroughly and have been practising exam questions and know how to make sure you get everything finished. Relax.

What should you do during the exam?

Read the instructions carefully:

Normally, you will be given time to read the instructions before the exam starts. Make sure you know **all** of the following:

- The number of questions and whether they are arranged in sections.
- How many questions in total you must answer, and how many from each section.
- Are there any compulsory questions? Mark these clearly.
- Are you asked to answer questions in any particular order?
- How many marks is each question worth?
- What types of questions are there?
- How are your answers to be shown? This may be particularly important if computer scored answer sheets are to be used.

Plan your time carefully and accurately and stick to your plan

Work out how much time you should allocate to each section/question. Failure to do this can result in questions being left out or rushed through. Try to leave time at the end for checking.

You will receive **no** marks for questions you have not attempted. If you do run out of time write short notes outlining your answers. It will at least give the examiner some idea of your knowledge.

Read the questions carefully

This is especially important if there is a choice of questions. Choose questions you are best able to answer.

- Make your decision quickly. Tick those you think you can do. Do the questions you find easiest first to help you gain confidence.
- Make sure your choice of questions follows the instructions accurately. For example: "One question from section A and two from Section B".
- Make sure you number your answers correctly.

Answer the questions

Essay/Short answer questions

- Analyse the question carefully. Underline key words etc.
- Make an outline. Write down the major arguments, minor points, examples etc. Before you start your answer, make sure you know how it will end.
- Write clearly and succinctly.
- Take care with handwriting, spelling and grammar.
- Make your answer the length specified. If

you're asked for 500 words, write 500, not 700.

- Keep to your time allocation. If your answer is taking too long, you may not be answering it correctly.

Remember: You can get no more than full marks for a question (and rarely that).

Objective questions (e.g., multiple choice, true/false)

- Check the method of response e.g., tick, cross, circle the number, blacken a space. If you fail to do this accurately in a computer scored paper you may not get credit, even if you know the answer.
- Read the question carefully. Do you have to choose the 'best response' or the 'correct response'?
- Be careful of negatives. For example: "Which of these is not ..."
"All of these except ..."
- Read ALL the alternatives, even if you think the first one is correct. There might be a better answer further on.
- If you don't know an answer, make a calculated guess (eliminate the answers you think are certainly wrong).
- Answer ALL questions, unless the instructions specify that marks will be taken off for incorrect answers.
- Answer all questions as you come to them, even if you are not sure of the answer. If you leave a question unanswered you may forget it or not have time to return to it. If you are unsure about an answer, write the answer you think is most likely, then note its number so you can check it later.
- If you change your mind about the answer, alter it, but only after careful consideration. First answers are usually correct.

At the end of the exam

- Never leave the room before time is up. Continual checking can only help.
- Make sure you've attempted all questions you've had to do. (It's easier to get the first 5 marks for a 20-mark essay than to get the last 5, i.e. to go from 15 to 20.)
- Check all answers. Look for words that are misspelt or illegible.
- Reread your written answers for spelling, grammar and sense.
- Avoid exam post-mortems. It's too late now and almost always depressing.

What should you do when things go wrong?

Panic attacks.

Symptoms include accelerated rate of heart beat, increased breathing rate, sweating,

uncontrollable shaking, and a feeling of anxiety.

- Prepare yourself so thoroughly that there's little chance of uncertainties creeping in to create panic.
- Practise mental relaxation techniques. Recognise the onset of panic and know what to do. Think about breathing, long, slow deep breaths. Think positive, you know you're well prepared, you know you can pass.

Memory Blocks

Everyone has a memory block occasionally. You know the information is there but it is just beyond reach.

- Don't panic! Relax. Use relaxation techniques. Think back over your notes. Try to remember other facts associated with the point you're trying to remember. If it still doesn't come, leave it and return to the question later.
- Thorough preparation is the best way to prevent memory blocks; they usually come out of last minute cramming.

Writers' cramp

Your writing hand aches dreadfully and it feels like you can't continue to write.

- Practising past exam papers helps in writing copious quantities quite fast. This helps 'build up the hand muscles'.
- During the exam, take frequent short breaks, and allow your hand to dangle limply at your side.
- Mild shaking, and alternate contracting and relaxing of your hand also helps.

Physical fatigue

If you have been working very hard in the lead up to the exams, and extending study time into sleep time, fatigue may well be a problem.

- Obtain adequate and regular sleep and pay careful attention to your diet.
- Make sure you have sufficient daily exercise in the lead up to the exams.
- During the exam, occasional stretch your arms, neck, back and legs.

Problems are best dealt with by prevention. Start your exam preparation early – prepare and practise.

Examination checklist

- **Do you have an exam strategy?**
- **Do you know what to do if something goes wrong?**

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