



Exam Preparation

Many courses have exams or tests as part of their assessment procedures. For some people exams cause high levels of stress and worry. This learning guide will outline how to best prepare for exams in the short and long term. Ideally you should be preparing for your exams from day one of the teaching period. However, if you have not done this it is still not too late to develop successful strategies for your exams.

Preparation throughout the year

Exams are set to assess not just your knowledge of a course but also your ability to analyse the material and to problem solve and use the concepts in a practical way. Therefore only rote learning (memorisation) of material for exams is rarely the best strategy.

In order to gain a thorough understanding of the concepts and principles in each course it is essential that you understand the work from week to week. To do this it is important that you attend all lectures, tutorial and workshops and read the prescribed texts and set readings. At the end of each session it is useful to review your notes, highlighting the main points and clarifying any parts you did not understand. Make sure your notes for each course are kept in an organised fashion in dedicated folders so that it will be easy for you to review material before the exam. If your note making skills are not good, check the Note Making learning guide in this series. All of these techniques will make your exam revision much easier as you will understand the subject matter throughout the course and will not be tempted to simply cram facts just prior to the exam.

In addition there are a number of practical questions you will need to clarify about the exam:

- What will you be assessed on? (See your course information book for details.)
- How will you be assessed? (See your course information book for details.)
- What topics will be examined?
- How long will the exam take?
- When will the exam be?
- What is the exam worth as a percentage of your final grade?

The answers to these questions will also guide your preparation for the exam. Ask your lecturer or tutor any questions you have regarding your exam well before the exam date. This will give you plenty of time to prepare well.

If you have a disability that may impact on your exam preparation or performance make sure you have spoken to the Disability Officer to arrange any special considerations well before the exam date.

The final 2-3 weeks

During the 2-3 weeks leading up to the exam you will need to prepare in a more intensive way. The following are useful strategies to try at this time.

- Develop an exam revision timetable where you break the course up into manageable 'chunks' for revision. Usually 1-2 hour periods on one course are optimum, as after this time your concentration can start to lag.
- Summarise each section in a useful way so that you are able to link ideas and concepts. Some people like to draw concept maps (sometimes called mind maps) which show important information and links in the material.
- Some text books have review questions at the end of a chapter. Try to answer these in conjunction with your lecture notes.

- Sometimes lecturers make past exam papers available to students. If this is the case, try to practise as many past exams as possible under exam conditions.
- Organise a study group. Perhaps you could take turns to be the leader in a discussion on each topic in the course.
- Try to think of your own possible exam questions and practise answering them. Often you will have a good idea from the lecturer on the sorts of questions or topics that might be included. Review what you have written to see if you are communicating your knowledge clearly and concisely.
- Make sure your revision process is an active one. Simply reading through notes or passively skimming through a text book is not an effective exam preparation technique.
- Enlist your family and friends if they are willing. Explaining a concept to someone who does not know the basics can be useful to clarify your own understanding.
- Make a glossary of essential terms for each course.
- In the days just prior to the exam, try to condense your notes even further so that on the night before the exam you will be able to quickly review the main concepts and ideas.
- Memorise any important formulae, lists or key points that are needed. You may try mnemonics where you think of rhymes or acronyms that help you to remember (eg many students learnt the acronym 'roy g biv' to help them remember the colours of the rainbow – red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet). Be creative.
- Make sure you eat well and give yourself some relaxation time during these weeks. If you allow yourself to get run down or exhausted during this time you will not be at your best for the exam.

The day of the exam

- Eat well before you sit for an exam to aid with energy levels and concentration.
- Also ensure you are well rested. Being tired for the exam because you stayed up all night cramming will adversely affect your concentration.
- Make sure you get to the exam venue in plenty of time.
- Check that you have all the material you need for the exam eg calculator, pens, pencil, eraser, text if it is an open book exam.
- Avoid last minute cramming as this may add to stress – if you don't know it now it is too late.
- Avoid talking to other stressed students while waiting for the exam as this can further elevate stress levels.

During the exam

- Try to relax once you are in the exam venue. Taking a few slow, deep breaths and consciously relaxing any tense muscles can help. Then you can focus more easily. If you find yourself getting stressed during the exam, take a little time to try and relax again and refocus.
- Use the allocated reading time to read the instructions carefully and look through the questions.
- Work out which questions have the highest percentage of marks attached.
- Work out how much time you have to answer each question (taking into account the relative percentage for each question). For instance, if you have 60 multiple choice or short answer questions to do in one hour you should allocate approximately one minute per question. If you have four essay questions to do in three hours allocate around 30-45 minutes for each; this allows some time at the end for checking your work. Questions that have a greater percentage of marks attached should have a correspondingly greater time allocated.
- Answer the question/s you feel confident about first. This will get you started and build your confidence.
- Make sure you write something – even if only in note form for all questions. Sometimes you will be able to gain a few extra marks for your notes.
- Allow some time at the end of your exam to go back over your work. This will allow you to pick up errors or add extra information.

After the exam

A few days after the exam it is useful to review your performance.

- What went well?
- What went wrong?
- What could you have done differently?
- How well were you prepared?
- How could you use your insights to be better prepared for your next exam?

Types of exams

There are many different types of exam including multiple choice, take home, short answer, oral, practical, essay and open book. The preparation for each of these can benefit from the suggestions mentioned above. In addition there are specific skills required for each type.

For instance, in essay exams you will be required to analyse the question carefully and structure an argument, much as you would when writing a normal essay. Usually you will not be expected to reference your material in an exam. For more information on structuring an essay check the Essay Writing learning guide or see the Academic Skills Module – Essay Writing on MyUni, Writing and Speaking at Uni. This is available at: https://myuni.adelaide.edu.au/webapps/portal/frameset.jsp?tab=courses&url=/bin/common/course.pl?course_id=115783_1&frame=top

When writing short answer exams it is useful to practice structuring clear paragraphs, so reviewing the Academic Skills Module – Writing Paragraphs on MyUni, Writing and Speaking at Uni will be useful. This is available at: https://myuni.adelaide.edu.au/webapps/portal/frameset.jsp?tab=courses&url=/bin/common/course.pl?course_id=115783_1&frame=top

To get more detailed information on other specific exam types see the University of South Australia Learning Guide – ‘Succeeding in exams’ available at: <http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/learningconnection/students/Lguides/lrngdes.asp>

Stress

Exam time can be a very stressful period, even for those who are well prepared for the challenge. You need to find ways to work productively with the stress to ensure you are doing the best you possibly can. If stress becomes overwhelming there are a number of strategies you can explore. The University of Adelaide Counselling Centre runs workshops on stress management and relaxation and has an excellent website specifically on managing exam stress. This can be found at: http://www.adelaide.edu.au/counselling_centre/brochures/exams.html

In addition you may be able to make a personal consultation time with one of the counsellors to work on your issues concerning exams by ringing the Counselling Centre on 83035663.

Further resources

For more information on exam preparation check the following websites:

University of Melbourne -

http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/llsu/resources/read_research.html

University of South Australia -

<http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/learningconnection/students/Lguides/lrngdes.asp>

If you require more assistance with exam preparation please contact the Language and Learning Service on 8303 5771.
Visit the LLS website for additional resources: www.adelaide.edu.au/clpd/lls/

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