

Exam Preparation

Many courses have exams as part of their assessment procedures. For some people, exams cause high levels of anxiety. Ideally, you should start preparing for your exams from day one of the teaching period. However, if you have not done this, it is not too late to develop successful study strategies.

Types of exams

There are many different types of exams including:

- essay
- multiple-choice
- open book
- oral
- practical
- short-answer
- take home

Each of these exams is attempting to assess the following:

- your ability to analyse the material
- your ability to solve problems
- your ability to use the concepts in a practical way
- your knowledge of the course completed

There are, however, 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. However, you would not be expected to reference your work in an exam.

Preparation throughout the year

There are a number of practical questions you will need to clarify about the exam. Ask your lecturer/tutor any questions well before the exam date, which will give you plenty of time to prepare.

The answers to these questions will guide your preparation.

- *What topics will be examined?*
- *How will you be assessed?*

- *When will the exam be?*
- *How long will the exam take?*
- *What is the exam worth as a percentage of your final grade?*

During the weeks leading up to the exam you will need to prepare in a more intensive way. Rote-learning (memorisation) of material for exams is rarely the best strategy. 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. Your notes for each course should be kept in an organised manner in folders, so that it will be easy for you to review material before the exam.

It is important that you:

- attend all lectures, tutorials and workshops
- clarify any terms/diagrams/calculations etc. that are unclear
- list keywords and practise their definitions
- read the prescribed text(s) and set reading(s)
- review your notes from week 1 and highlight the main points

The final 2–3 weeks

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/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 devise your own possible exam questions and practise answering them. Often you will have a good idea from the lecturer the sorts of questions/topics that might be included.
- Make sure your revision process is an active one. Simply reading through notes or passively skimming through a text book is not effective exam preparation.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- Make sure you eat well and give yourself some relaxation time during these weeks. If you allow yourself to get rundown during this time, you will not be at your best.

The day of the exam

The following are useful strategies to try at this time:

- Avoid last minute cramming, as this may add to stress.
- Eat well before you sit for an exam to aid with energy levels and concentration.
- Ensure you are well rested. Being tired for the exam because you stayed up all night cramming will adversely affect your concentration.
- Arrive at the exam venue in plenty of time.
- Check that you have all the material you need for the exam e.g. calculator(s), pen(s), pencil(s), eraser(s), and text(s) if it is an open book exam.
- Take a watch or small clock to monitor the time.
- Keep away from other stressed students while waiting for the exam.

During the exam

The following are useful strategies to try at this time:

- 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.
- 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 (considering the relative percentage for each question) e.g. if you have 60 multiple-choice or short-answer questions in one hour, you should allocate approximately one question per minute. If you have four essay questions to do in three hours allocate around 30–45 minutes per essay. Questions that have a greater percentage of marks should have a 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.

After the exam

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

- *What went well?*
- *What went wrong?*
- *How well were you prepared?*
- *What could you have done differently?*

If you become overly stressed

Exam time can be a very stressful period, even for those who are prepared for the challenge. If stress becomes overwhelming, there are a number of strategies you can explore. The Counselling Service runs workshops on stress management and relaxation. They can be contacted on 8303 5663.

In addition, the Counselling Service has an excellent website specifically on managing exam stress. This can be found at: www.adelaide.edu.au/counselling_centre/brochures/exams.html.

If you have a disability that may impact on your exam preparation or performance, make sure you have spoken to a Disability Officer to arrange any special considerations well before the exam date. Again, you may contact the university's Counselling Service on 8303 5663.

Other useful sites

Learning Guides

http://www.adelaide.edu.au/clpd/all/learning_guides/learningGuide_practicalStudyHabits.pdf

http://www.adelaide.edu.au/clpd/all/learning_guides/learningGuide_multipleChoiceExams.pdf

Online Self-Help Modules

Review the Academic Skills Module 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

The University of Adelaide Policy

Examinations Policy – <http://www.adelaide.edu.au/policies/465/>

Past Exam Papers

Since Semester 2, 2002 exam papers within the University of Adelaide have been archived in the library. Refer to: <http://www.adelaide.edu.au/library/serv/exampprs.html>

Exam Preparation Printable Guides

<http://www.mq.edu.au/studyskillssupport/pdfs/Exampreparationandstrategiesv2.pdf>

http://www.studentservices.utas.edu.au/factsheets/EffectiveExamPreparation_000.pdf

Multiple-Choice Exams

http://www.lib.uoguelph.ca/assistance/learning_services/handouts/multiple_choice_exams.cfm

<http://www.law.suffolk.edu/offices/stuservices/asp/pdf/MasteringMultiChoiceQues.pdf>

http://cms.unimelb.edu.au/studentservices/asu/documents/obsolete_flyers/Study-Multiple-ChoiceExams-Flyer.pdf

Problem Solving Exams

http://www.laws.canterbury.ac.nz/documents/prob_solv.pdf

http://cms.unimelb.edu.au/studentservices/asu/documents/obsolete_flyers/Study-Problem-solving-exams-Flyer.pdf

Essay Writing Exams

<http://umanitoba.ca/student/u1/lac/media/Writing-Essay-Exams-06.pdf>

<http://www.princeton.edu/writing/center/resources/EssayExams.pdf>

http://cms.unimelb.edu.au/studentservices/asu/documents/obsolete_flyers/Study-WritingEssaysInExams-Flyer.pdf

If you require more assistance with Exam Preparation, please contact the Writing Centre on 8313 5771.

Visit the Writing Centre website for additional resources: www.adelaide.edu.au/writingcentre/

Principal Author: Helene Hipp 2005

Revised: Donna Velliariis 2009