

Short-Answer Exams

Writing Centre Learning Guide

Some short-answer exam questions will test your memory (factual questions), while others will test your ability to apply learnt concepts (interpretive questions). Your answer may require one word, a phrase, a sentence or a paragraph. What is required is usually indicated by the amount of space allowed for your answer and the number of marks (weighting) of the question.

Introduction

As the name suggests, short-answer exams consist of a series of questions that require concise answers. To prepare for a short-answer exam, you should review your lecture notes and primary text(s), make a list of important terms, and practise questions related to each of those terms. If possible, try to obtain past exam papers to practise your short-answer technique.

Please check with your course coordinator, lecturer, or the discipline or School office to see whether past exam papers are available to you.

The mark allocated for each question should be indicated on the exam paper. The number of marks indicates the 'weighting'. If the question requires three key points, the number of marks might be '3' or '6' depending on the weighting of that question. Hence, you should not include irrelevant material or try to write a discursive essay when the marks for questions are relatively low.

To cope with short-answer exams, you first need to identify what you are being asked. In general, there are two types of short-answer exam questions: factual (i.e. testing memory work) and interpretive (i.e. testing your ability to apply learnt concepts).

Factual short-answer questions

The function of factual questions is to describe or define the way things are. Factual questions do not require an explanation, but it is often an advantage to give one because it shows the examiner that you have a good understanding of the subject matter. Factual questions often use the following instruction words:

Define	Give	Identify	List
Name	Outline	Provide	State

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Examples:

- Define radial and bilateral symmetry as found in the body plans of certain invertebrates.
- Define the following terms: (a) prepaid expense; and (b) unearned revenue.
- Identify the three major reasons for salination of the Murray River.
- List two characteristics that distinguish fungi from plants.
- What is a comproportionation reaction?
- What is a contra account?
- What is the Hardy-Weinberg principle?
- What is zygotic meiosis?

Interpretive short-answer questions

Interpretive questions test your ability to apply your knowledge. Summarise questions in your own words to see whether you understand what is being asked. If a short-answer question requires several sentences, planning is essential. Interpretive questions often use the following instruction words:

Account for ...	Comment on ...	Compare ...
Consider ...	Contrast ...	Describe ...
Discuss ...	Distinguish ...	Elaborate on ...
Explain ...	Give reasons for ...	How is ... different ...
Illustrate ...	Support your answer...	What do you understand by ...

Examples:

- Describe the normal clinical appearance of the oral mucosa covering the floor of the mouth.
- Describe the structure and functions of the 'water vascular system' as found in a long-armed sea star.
- Explain how some animals can digest cellulose without themselves producing digestive cellulases.
- Explain what is meant by the word 'ltd' when it is included in a company's name.
- How would you distinguish a young monocot stem from a young dicot stem?
- Some zoologists believe that limitations imposed by the water vascular system may explain why echinoderms do not live in fresh water or on dry land. Do you agree? Why?
- Suggest a reason for the pronounced colour difference between the biomolecules oxyhaemoglobin and deoxyhaemoglobin.

Combined questions

Some short-answer exams may use a combination of 'factual' and 'interpretive' questions. Oftentimes, the first part of the question will be factual and the second part interpretive.

Examples:

- List the three subphyla of the Phylum Chordata. What features permit us to place them all within the same phylum?
- What benefits does territorial behaviour provide? Why do many animals display territorial behaviour?

Before the exam

Use questions from past exam papers, discussion questions from your textbook(s) or make up your own mock exam questions. You should practise short-answer exam questions in the same time-frame that you will have to follow in the actual exam.

The format of your answers may depend on your discipline. Some examiners prefer complete sentences, while others are happy with dot points. Always check with your course coordinator, lecturer or tutor for their preference.

Reading time

First, make sure that you have been given the correct paper with all the pages and then read the instructions carefully. In most exams, you will be allowed 10-20 minutes reading time.

Once you have read the instructions, you should quickly work out approximately how much time you can spend per question. Remember to allow some time at the end to check your answers. This should not be a difficult task if you have practised past exam papers.

Question + Marks	Short-Answer Type	Planning Time	Writing Time
Q1 – 2 marks	Factual	2 mins	5 mins
Q2 – 5 marks	Interpretive	5 mins	10 mins
Q3 – 10 marks	Mixed	8 mins	15 mins
Total		15 mins	30 mins

When you begin to read the exam paper, identify the topics covered and think about the type of writing required. This will not only help you identify easy questions that you may want to answer first, but it may also give you clues for answers elsewhere in the exam paper.

Read each question carefully and identify the instruction words, topic words and any restricting words. An exam is like a mental game in which the examiner tells you what they want you to do through the use of keywords. Once you have identified the keywords and what they mean, you should be able to answer the questions more successfully.

In addition, a single word may totally change the meaning of a question. Words to watch out for include:

all	always	and	bad
best	but	either	equal
good	great	guarantees	is
is not	less	more	most
much	never	no	not
or	some	sometimes	usually

Finally, if you have time, start planning an answer for one or two of the longer questions. Do not write out whole answers in advance, as you will only have to copy them onto your official answer sheet which is time and energy wasting.

During the exam

Make sure your writing is legible. You cannot get marks if the lecturer cannot read your answers. If time is an issue, make sure you cover questions you feel most confident about first. In addition, the following three points are important to remember:

- 1) **Attempt to answer all questions**
You may get one mark just for jotting down a quick answer; however, even part marks cannot be allocated if you write nothing.
- 2) **Repeat keywords**
Use keywords from the question which will help you focus on what is being asked.
- 3) **Quantity is never a substitute for quality**
Avoid writing everything you know about a topic; rather, look at what has been asked of you and provide a clear and concise response.

Other useful information

Student Services

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 services and resources you can access.

[Counselling Support](#) at the University of Adelaide can provide free individual consultations for enrolled students. You can register for appointments [online](#), or by calling 8313 5663

The [Exam Wellbeing](#) hub has useful advice and strategies on studying for exams and managing stress.

If you are not coping with your exams on the basis of your disability or medical condition, please speak to your Disability Advisor who can discuss whether you are eligible for Alternative Exam Arrangements (AEA). You can register with the [Disability Support online](#).

Books

Cottrell, S. (2007). *The exam skills handbook: Achieving peak performance*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

