

THE EXAMINATION – THE WEEK BEFORE

You need to start your preparation for the actual examination during the week before.

Checking

- Do you know the day, date and time of your examination?
- Do you know where the examination centre is?
- How are you going to get to the examination centre?
- How long will it take you?
- If you are going by car, where is the nearest parking?
- If you are going by public transport, how near is the nearest stop to the examination centre?
- Do you need to make arrangements such as:
 - childcare;
 - permission for leave from work?

What you need to take into the examination

- Have you got enough pens, pencils, ruler, eraser, ...?
- Can you take in a calculator? Does it have to be a specific type?
- Will the batteries in your calculator last?
- Do you have your handbook ready?
- Do you have any other material you can take into the examination ready?
- Have you got proof of identification?
- What drinks, sweets, etc. are you going to take with you?

THE EXAMINATION – THE DAY BEFORE AND THE DAY OF THE EXAMINATION

What should you do on the day before the examination?

Check

- Have you everything ready for the examination?
- Are your plans for getting to and from the examination centre finalised?

Arriving at the Centre

- How early do you intend to arrive?
- What are you going to do when you get there?

(Have a coffee, talk to other students, quietly contemplate, ...)

After the Examination

- What are you going to do after the examination?

(Head straight for home, discuss the exam with other students, ...)

Unexpected Problems

What do you do if you:

- Are ill on the day of the examination?
- Have a car accident?
- The car / bus / train breaks down?
- Are taken ill during the examination?
- Have a family crisis?

THE EXAMINATION – STARTING THE EXAMINATION

What should you do when the invigilator tells you to start?

- Read the instructions on the front, making a note of compulsory questions and choices of question.
- Read through the whole paper (*thoroughly or skim read?*).
- If there is a choice, make an initial choice of questions.
- Plan a rough order in which to do the questions (*Shortest or longest first? Familiar or unfamiliar first? Easy or hard questions first?*).
- For long questions, plan your answers.
- **Start Writing.**

THE EXAMINATION – TRAPS

You are part of the team of examiners reporting back on the year's exams. What sort of things will they have identified as losing students marks?

- Not following the exam paper's instructions about how many and which questions to answer.
- Misreading the questions.
- Spending too much time on some questions and not enough on others.
- Putting down everything you know about a topic instead of selecting material relevant to the question.
- Getting into a panic.
- Illegible handwriting.
- Making no distinction between 'Compare', 'Evaluate', 'Discuss', 'Contrast', 'Explain', 'Determine', etc.
- Substituting personal experience and opinions for reasoned and supported arguments.
- Not re-reading answers and checking for mistakes and irrelevancies.

THE EXAMINATION – TIME MANAGEMENT

You are more likely to pass the examination if you choose the questions you do carefully and plan your time and your answers. The following provides some suggestions.

Choose the questions and order them

- During your first read through of the paper, label (with a tick) those questions you feel confident about.
- Then read through the questions you have ticked and put an additional tick against the ones you prefer.
- Start by answering the questions with the most ticks.

Plan your time

When planning to use the time available, you should:

- make sure that you are answering the right number of questions;
- divide your time according to the number of marks for each question and / or section;
- write down the finishing time for each question;
- try to allow 10 minutes for checking at the end.

Try to stick to your plan: evidence indicates that two half-answered questions obtain more marks than one completed question and one unanswered one. This is especially vital where you have to answer a certain number of questions from different sections of the exam paper. If your timing goes wrong, you could end up with less time than you would wish to finish the last question. If this happens, plan your answer and write out the main points in note form. This will earn you a few extra, valuable marks.

Plan your answers

- Mark the key words in the question to ensure that you identify the topic correctly.
- Mark the process words to help you to understand the instructions within the question.
- Jot down the main points you can recall which might be relevant, along with examples and evidence you can use.
- Work fast and uncritically at this stage – you can always cut out unwanted material later.
- Be ruthless about cutting out material you know well but which doesn't really answer the question.
- If you have jotted down points just as they occur to you, you can then number them to indicate the order you want to put them in.

THE EXAMINATION – EXAMINATION ANXIETY**Coping strategies****The ‘Stop’ method.**

Imagine yourself in the exam, sitting at your desk. Try to get in touch with your feelings of stress as you look at the paper in front of you. Now, sit back in your seat and drop your arms by your sides. Uncurl your fingers let the tension drain from them and say firmly to yourself ‘Stop!’. Wait for 10 to 15 seconds and then start on the exam paper again.

Breathing

Focus on your breathing. Breath in through your nose and out again slowly through your mouth. Imagine you are blowing away your anxiety. Repeat 5 times and start the exam paper again.

Planning strategies

Identify useful strategies to make the actual day easier, e.g.

- planning the journey;
- meeting up beforehand;
- dressing comfortably;
- getting the right materials together.

Identify things which would make the actual day worse (then you can avoid them!).

THE EXAMINATION – DOING THE EXAMINATION

Here is one method for tackling the examination which has been successful for many students:

- Get started, choosing an easy question (*Candidates fail because they spent a long time staring at the first question, resulting in panic*).

- Now that your confidence is starting to increase, go through the paper, doing those questions you feel confident of tackling (*You will probably get enough marks to pass during this first part of the examination*).

- Once you have been through the paper once, start again at the beginning, tackling those you had left which now, with your increased confidence, seem to be more straight forward. (*Still leave the ones which you are not confident of tackling – you can't afford to sit and stare at a question for 10 minutes whilst there are still questions you can do in less time*).

- Check your answers:
 - Have you answered the questions you are given, rather than the ones you would like to have been given?
 - Have you made any obvious mistakes (e.g. *correct rounding*)?
 - Have you missed out part of a question by mistake?

- Now, if there is still time, go back to the questions you have not done – once you have tackled every question you feel confident about, then there is nothing lost by spending 10 minutes on a question you are very unsure about.

THE EXAMINATION – EXAMINATION TECHNIQUE: SUMMARY

Even when students have studied a course thoroughly, they can fail to do themselves justice in the examination through:

- inadequate/inefficient revision
- poor exam technique.

Remember that revision and examination techniques are skills that can be learned about and practised.

The Format of the Examination

It is important to familiarise yourself with this by studying specimen papers/past papers.

Some Common Mistakes in Examinations

It can also be very helpful to think about things that students do wrong in examinations, which adversely affect their performance. Knowing the pitfalls can help you to avoid them!

The following are based on Examiners' Reports:

- failure to follow basic examination instructions e.g. about the number of questions to answer from each section of the paper.
- misallocation of time - at worst resulting in insufficient questions being answered e.g. 3 instead of 4, throwing away 25% of marks.
- failure to answer the question set, misreading or misinterpreting the question; writing 'All I know about..... Cases have even been noted of students coming in with prepared answers or quoting TMAs word for word without any attempt to adapt them to the specific question set.
- basing answers largely on 'common sense' rather than on the course material.
- failure to illustrate and support arguments sufficiently e.g. with references to specific theories, authorities, case studies etc.
- poorly presented answers e.g. lack of planning leading to weakly structured, disorganised answers; lack of conclusions so answers 'peter out' and so on. (Such problems have even been noted among students with a good understanding of the course material - so be warned!)
- writing illegibly.

Awareness of problems like these suggests things that you can do to make the most of your examination:

Examination Strategies**Read Examination instructions carefully**

How many questions are to be answered? How many from each section? How long does this allow per question? etc. (e.g. 3 hour paper; 4 questions to be answered; each carrying equal weight; 3 questions from Part I and one from Part II; approx. 45 minutes. per question.)

Read through the paper and choose questions carefully

Allow 5 -10 minutes for this. Focus on questions relating to blocks/themes which you concentrated on in revision.

Order of questions

It does not usually matter what order you take the questions in - just number them carefully. Do them in the order that you feel happiest with (for example, some students like to do their 'best' question first; others like to start with their 'second best' - this can build up confidence, without so much danger of over running on time).

Spend time thinking about and planning each question

Do this before you start writing it up (eg. 5 -10 minutes per question, leaving 30-35 minutes for writing up). Don't be panicked by the 'scribblers':

- Read questions carefully, underline key words etc. Notice if there are different parts to cover. Don't be sidetracked by similar questions you have tackled in the past e.g. in TMAs. Remember the aim is to answer the specific question set, not just to air knowledge.
- 'Brainstorm' - jot down relevant ideas as they come to you, in the answer book. Thinking about the question should already have started to 'home you in' on relevant course material eg. particular unit or part of unit. Note down main themes and arguments, ideas and concepts plus authorities, illustrations and examples; often just a word or phrase is enough to capture a point - pattern/ spray notes can be useful here. Do not censor ideas or the flow may dry up, you can strike out anything irrelevant afterwards; if the flow gets stuck write something silly like 'fish and chips'. Sometimes thinking about the TV programmes can jog your memory. If you're aware of any material that should be included but you just can't call it to mind, then 'send a message to your brain' and leave it (remember how names etc. often come back to you when you stop trying to remember them).

NB Where a question is block related, material from that block should be to the fore but you can still cross refer to other parts of the course or to summer school material where relevant. Indeed examiners praise those who recognise interconnections in the course and can use material across the course to illustrate themes and issues.

- Sort out the jotted points into a sensible sequence. Just put a number by each point to indicate the order you decide on. Cross out anything that doesn't look relevant; remember that exam answers should have an introduction, main body and conclusion just like TMAs.

Some final points on planning:

- Examiners' reports praise evidence of planning it leads to better structured answers.
- Jot plans in the answer book and mark them off neatly afterwards to indicate rough work, but make sure examiner can still see them - examiners warm to signs of planning!
- Some students like to plan all the answers first, while really fresh. Others prefer to take each in turn - do what suits you best.

Writing up answers - some points

There's no need to write out questions (unless it helps you to focus) as it can waste valuable time, but keep referring back to the question in your answer to keep you on course and show that you are addressing it.

- Do not forget introductions and conclusions. Use introductions to indicate clearly how you intend to tackle the question. If the question is at all ambiguous, state how you have interpreted it. Do not let your argument ' peter out ', but draw it together clearly in a conclusion.
- Remember, the examiner does not know you, so cannot assume you know something that is not there. So do not be afraid to 'state the obvious'. Express yourself as clearly as you can.
- If you suddenly remember an important point, write it in a box with an arrow or asterisk to show where it should have gone - so you don't spoil the flow.
- Try to write legibly.

NB By adopting a stage-by-stage approach like this, you are not asking your mind to do too much at once. This makes for better answers. With piles of scripts to mark the examiner will warm to your relevant, well organised, clearly presented and legible answers!

Timing - remember to stick to timing as rigidly as you can:

- Remember how much time you have per question. Keep a careful eye on the time. When you are coming towards the end of the time allotted to a question, try to round it off and then move on to the next. Resist the temptation to over-run.
- If the worst comes to the worst and you do run short of time for the last question, put something down. You could put a plan in note form, or start the answer and finish with an indication of where it was leading i.e. 'Had I had time I would have ...'. Best of all is not to get into this situation, so learn to budget your time carefully.

A few practical hints - the following will help to avoid unnecessary worry or problems:

- Get well organised beforehand e.g. check carefully when and where you have to go; make sure you have a spare pen; wear suitable clothes, you don't want to be too hot or cold in an exam.
- Take along anything (within reason) that will comfort you - sweets, a flask of coffee, a good luck charm, a photo, for instance of your family or your tutor, to calm or inspire you .
- Get to the exam in good time - you don't want anything to fluster you.
- If you are early, avoid talking to others - it can be depressing.
- Once in the exam room, find your place, settle in, get your equipment organised, unwrap sweets etc. Do not let others disturb you.
- if you feel upset then write down on the paper how you feel - it can release tension.
- Afterwards avoid post-mortems. Let a decent interval elapse and only then think back and try to learn from the experience.

NOTES ON OU EXAMINATIONS

IMPORTANT POINTS:

1. The identification you take must have your photograph on, as well as your signature - so if you haven't got a passport, smart card driving licence, OUSA card or something similar, you need to get one now.
2. Your script won't be marked if you write your name anywhere on it.
3. If you arrive late, you may be allowed to sit the exam (but it may not be marked if you are more than 30 minutes late); you won't be given any extra time.
4. Work which is crossed out will not be marked.
5. You must not have a mobile phone on your person or in a bag you have with you at your desk (even if it is switched off).
6. If another student is doing something to annoy you (e.g. tapping their foot continually, unwrapping sweets noisily, opening a can, etc.), tell the invigilator.
7. Tell the invigilator if you are ill during an exam, and fill in a E39 form afterwards (details in the booklet).

LATE TMAs.

1. Any late TMA received before the due date of the last TMA may count towards your final continuous assessment grade provided you have asked your tutor for permission before the cut-off date.
2. Any late TMA received after the due date of the last TMA will not count towards your final continuous assessment grade unless there are exceptional circumstances.
3. You also might like to note that your tutor is not obliged to mark a late TMA.