

Revising and taking exams



Get exams in perspective

For students who find preparing and taking examinations very stressful, it may help to begin by putting exams into perspective. Failing an examination is never life threatening. Life will go on afterwards and in many cases you do get a second chance. Another important point to stress is that everyone involved in setting and marking exams wants you to pass. At university, module passes or degree awards are not rationed to the top 70 or 80% of students, they are available to everyone who meets the standards. Therefore, you are not in competition with other students.

Memory and understanding

Exams are not about remembering everything. They are about showing what you have understood. But do not worry if you feel that you have not understood everything from your course. There are bound to be areas of uncertainty. In the run up to exams it is better to consolidate what you have learnt rather than worry about what you have not learnt.

Revision strategy

Given that exams are about what you understand and not what you can remember, your revision strategy should be based on pulling ideas together, then making links and connections between them. Revision gives you the opportunity to round off a course and get your thoughts in order.

Allow enough time

There is no set formula for working out when to start revising. It depends on so many things; how much time you have, how much material you have to review, and your own personal way of studying. If you are reading this, then you are probably thinking about revision, therefore, now is probably a good time to start.

Get hold of recent past exam papers

This confirms the format of the paper and familiarises you with the language and style of questions. Ask your tutor for examples of these. Read the paper carefully and identify themes. Is it divided into clear sections? This information is important in guiding your revision strategy.

It is probably unrealistic to attempt sitting a past paper under exam conditions in your own home. However, you could select one question at a time and try to answer it within the same time you would allow in the exam. With long 'essay type' answers you could practice sketching out a quick plan in 3 or 4 minutes, just as you would in the real exam.

Ask your tutor for advice and guidance

She or he may direct you to selected areas of your course. If you have a lot of course material, you might use this advice along with evidence from past papers, to help you judge which sections of your course you are going to concentrate on.

Sort out your course materials

Group or file them by section or topic. Include notes, handouts, photocopies, essays, and coursework. Try and limit the number of sections or topics to about seven. If handouts or notes seem to cross between sections, you may find that you have to mark up documents by using highlighter pens, where each colour represents a section or topic. Or you may have to photocopy the document so a copy can be included in each relevant section.

Draw up a timetable

Identify how many hours you have available for revision between now and the exam. Divide the hours by the number of sections or topics. If each section or topic on your course carries equal weighting in the exam then you may need to allow equal time to revise each part.

Identify the central issues with each topic

You may have to ask yourself fundamental questions about the topics in order to find these. For example, you may have to ask: what is so special about this method? What are the key points about this theory? How does one thing affect another?

Make condensed notes on the central issues

Work with each topic at a time to reduce the amount of information so your notes concentrate only on the central ideas.

Summarise your notes onto a single sheet of paper or index card

This creates a highly portable revision system which you can carry with you in the weeks and days before the exam. The purpose of making summaries is to extract the essence of a topic and turn it into a manageable format. Your summaries could be bullet points, diagrams, flowcharts or other images depending on which format works best for your subject or personal preference.

Work with other students where possible

This is so you can share strategies and give mutual support. In a small group you could agree to revise a topic each and then meet again later with summaries of your notes for each other. You can try testing or quizzing each other on key ideas.

Before the exam:

Clearly mark the date, time and venue of the exam in your diary or calendar.

Try and give yourself a break from revision the night before. Relax, watch television or go for a walk.

Get a good night's sleep.

On the day of the exam:

Allow enough time to get to the venue.

Think positively; this is a chance to show what you have learned.

Have a clear strategy for tackling the paper.

In the exam room:

Scan the paper for questions you can answer; mark them.

Tackle your best question first; this helps to get you started.

Note the time you start writing by each question and stick to the time you have allocated; extra time spent writing rarely gains you extra marks.

Make a brief plan for essay type answers before you begin.

Tackle all the questions in order to maximise the number of grade points you can get.

Make a rough note of any new thoughts that occur to you while you are writing.

Do your best to write legibly; cross out any rough notes with a straight line.