

Student Disability Services

Exams: Preparation and Technique

Much of what we think of as exam technique needs to be sorted out in the revision period. In addition to revising to learn content, it is most important to prepare for your management of the exam itself; you will want to make the best possible use of the time available to you, and if you don't think about that until you are sitting in the exam hall, it will probably be too late.

Sections 1- 3 are for the lead-up to the exam; Section 4 is for the exam itself

1. The Exam Paper

- Get hold of past papers and (assuming there are no planned changes to the structure) check out the following:
- How long is the exam (2 hours; 3 hours). Do you have extra time? How long will the exam be for you?
- Is the paper divided into sections? How many questions from each section are you required to answer?
- Are the marks weighted? e.g. Section A is worth 33% (3 questions at 11% each), Section B is worth 67% (2 questions at 33.5% each).
- How much choice do you have? (Remember that although choice is good, the greater the choice the more reading you have to do.)
- Does all or part of the exam involve multiple choice questions? Are they negatively marked?

2. Plan your time

If you have extra time, it works best to use most of it at the beginning rather than for checking your answers at the end. You can take more time in the planning stage, and can also pace yourself throughout. By the end of the exam it's often too late to make any major alterations, and minor errors such as spelling mistakes will be unlikely to have a significant effect on your mark.

Time planning for a 2-hour exam with 10 minutes' extra time per hour:

- Deduct 30 minutes for reading, choosing questions and planning
- Deduct 10 minutes for checking and some built-in flexibility

- Divide the remaining 100 minutes between questions, taking account of any weighting of marks. Using the example in 1. (above) you would have about 10 minutes each for the questions in section A and about 35 minutes for each of the two questions in Section B.
- Work out what this actually means; how much would you, realistically, be able to write in that time? Your writing speed for exams is likely to be between 13 words a minute (slow) and 26 words a minute (fast), so take this into account. How much detail could you provide?

3. Revision

Now that you are familiar with what the exam entails you are in a better position to start revising. Keep referring to past papers and use them to test your progress. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Don't just read through your notes and course texts, as this isn't an active enough approach to result in learning (see also Effective Reading). It may help you to learn if you restructure your lecture notes. You could transfer the information to index cards, reducing each topic to as few words as possible, using symbols, diagrams etc.
- When reading, use particular exam questions to provide yourself with a context and make notes that relate to the question: See Effective Reading.
- If you think you are a visual learner (you have a good visual memory and respond to colour, graphics and patterns) make mind maps / charts and put them on your walls.
- If you think you learn best by listening, record important information on a digital recorder and play it back regularly.
- Most people find that teaching is an excellent way to learn – try talking about your subject to peers and willing friends and family.
- Write plans for answers to exam questions – this is less time consuming than answering whole questions so you can cover more – it will also be good practice for planning in the exam
- Use mnemonics ('tags' to memory) to retain essential or factual information. The 'memory palace' technique can be very useful for retaining a sequence of related terms or ideas. See http://www.ted.com/talks/joshua_foer_feats_of_memory_anyone_can_do.html for an excellent short talk on and demonstration of how to use this technique. Write introductory paragraphs for exam questions
- Practise answering exam questions in the given time

- Just before each exam remind yourself of the structure of the paper and your time plan
- Last minute, night-before revision can be useful if you use your time effectively and stop before you feel tired and over-whelmed. Use the time to revisit essential information or one or two core topics.

4. Putting planned technique into practice

In the exam

Content is more important than style, but structure matters because your writing should be coherent. Legibility matters. Full references to literature are not usually necessary but authors' names and, if possible, dates of publication should be cited.

- Make a note of your time plan – you will need to monitor your timing all the way through.
- Read through the paper and make your choices. Make sure you have considered both **content words** and **instruction words**: Content words relate to the topics themselves (*autism, structuralism, case law*) and instruction words tell you what to do with the topic (*analyse, compare, evaluate, justify, examine, explain*). There is a danger (because of nerves) to jump on the content words and just write everything you know about the subject. This will be unlikely to result in a high mark – you need to do as you are asked.
- Plan your answers – it can be helpful to do all the planning at the beginning of the exam as it's a way of controlling nerves before diving in to the answers. Does the question give you a built-in structure, i.e. a list of instructions? Decide on the main sections (e.g. of the essay) and their order, and make a note of them. Make a note of any particular points you are afraid of forgetting.
- Keep track of time and move on to the next question when the time comes. If you haven't finished an answer leave space on your booklet to come back to it. If you seriously run out of time, complete your answers in note form – and your plan can also be handed in.
- There are specific techniques which can help with multiple choice questions. Look up one of the helpful online guides to tips and strategies to use in these examinations.
- Once the exam is over, avoid discussing it with anyone or dwelling on what you should or should not have written. Move on to planning for the next one.

Recommended text: *The Exam Skills Handbook* by **Stella Cottrell** Palgrave Macmillan 2007

