



Studying for examinations

Some basic guidelines

Studying efficiently requires organisation of time and resources. Ideally, you should begin studying about 4 weeks before your exams. Draw up a study planner and use it to help you to organise your time.

The following points are a general set of guidelines to help you prepare for exams.

ORGANISE THE MATERIAL YOU NEED TO STUDY

Do this by gathering together all your lecture and tutorial notes. Make sure these correspond to your course outline and divide your notes into the topics covered each week during the semester. Once you have organised all your material you are ready to choose which topics you need to study for the exam.

FOR ESSAY EXAMS

Find out how many questions you have to answer. If, for example, you have to answer 4 questions, choose and study 4 in detail and 1 or 2 extra as backup topics.

FOR MULTIPLE CHOICE EXAMS

Multiple choice exams will usually only cover what has been discussed in the lectures and tutorials. Use the course outline as a framework for study. Look for the main ideas and concepts covered in each week of lectures and tutorials and then find details to support them. Use flash cards to help you memorise the information. (You can make your own flash cards, or buy packs of small, lined cardboard cards available at stationery shops). On your flash cards write down definitions, main ideas and supporting information. Use the flash cards to help you remember the significant information. You can carry them with you and study them when you are travelling by bus or train.

FOR SHORT ANSWER EXAMINATIONS

Prepare for short answer examinations as you would for a multiple choice exam, but practise writing out short answers to questions. Concentrate on giving the answer in the first sentence and then using details and facts to illustrate your understanding. Remember to keep it short, or you will waste precious time during the exam.

USE A STUDY PLANNER

Use a study planner to help you organise your time leading up to the examinations. This could be an online planner, diary or wallchart. Blank out the times when you are at lectures or working. The time you have left is the time you have for planning study sessions. Issues to remember are whether you are more alert in the morning or evening. Schedule study times that suit your personal rhythms. Make sure you schedule time off from study as well; this will help you manage the stress of studying and help keep you fresh and alert. Decide whether you want to devote a solid week to a subject or to include variety in your study schedule and timetable a range of study sessions during the week that deal with different topics.

PRIORITISE THE HARDEST SUBJECTS

You may need to spend more time studying the subjects you find most difficult.

MAKE A STUDY AREA

Choose a quiet place for study where you won't be easily distracted. Always study in the same place. Make sure you have good lighting. Don't try to study the entire course in one sitting! Divide the subject up into topics that you need to know for the exam. For example: In this study period I will look at the reasons for the American Civil War.

SET STUDY GOALS

Set yourself a goal for each study session. This will help you keep track of what you are learning. Write your goals down as soon as you begin your study session, or set them at the end of the study session for next time. This will set up a framework for beginning the next session quickly and help avoid procrastination.

Examples of study goals might be:

- I will read through and summarise chapters 3 and 4.
- I will work through 5 equations.
- I will learn the main concepts that were discussed in lectures from week 1-3.

SET STUDY PERIODS

Don't study for longer than 50 minutes at a time. It is better to study for a short intense period of time with sustained concentration than long periods of time when you are tired and not really engaging with the study material.

USE THE SQ3R METHOD OF STUDY

- survey: Before you begin to study, survey the material to get an idea of what it is about. Look at tables of contents, possible chapter summaries, graphs and tables. Skim through lecture notes to get a picture of the main ideas.
- question: Turn the headings and sub headings of the text into questions and use these questions as a guide to direct your reading.
- read: Read through the material once without making notes. On your second reading, make notes of the main ideas and attempt to answer the questions you formulated from the headings and sub headings in the previous step.
- recall: With the book shut, try to recall what you have read. Make notes of what you remember and check their accuracy against your study material.
- review: Review all your notes at the end of the study period. This is an important part of the study process because it can prevent you from forgetting what you have learnt. You can also try summarising your notes down to key words that will act as memory triggers for related ideas. Also, set review times separately from your study times. Read through your review notes and then try reciting them back.

REVIEW OLD EXAM PAPERS

Get hold of old exam papers (generally available from the library), and work through them. Look at how they fit into the course. Look at the wording of the questions and familiarise yourself with the clue words (see section 5 on clue words). Practise doing the papers under exam conditions and carefully review your answers.

FORM A STUDY GROUP

Get together with other students to look at practice exams and to give each other feedback. Try explaining the main ideas and arguments in the subject to each other. Research has shown that this is a very effective way of improving your understanding of course content.



EXAMINATION INSTRUCTION WORDS (OR “CLUE” WORDS)

In exams requiring a written answer, every question contains an instruction word or “clue” word. These words indicate what angle the lecturer wants you to take when answering the question. Instruction words tell you exactly what to do in your essay, so they are particularly important in essay exams.

An exam is like a mental game in which the lecturers tell you what they want. To play the game successfully you need to be aware of the precise meanings of the words in the questions. Once you have found the instruction words and worked out exactly what they mean, you can answer the question as clearly as possible.

For example:

Compare the goals of liberal and socialist feminism.

The instruction word in this question is *compare*.

If the question asked you to “Evaluate the goals of ...”, it would require a completely different answer.

The following is a list of the most common instruction words and their meanings in exam questions to help you prepare for exams. Because the list is long, it is a good idea to read through past exam papers to familiarise yourself with the most commonly used instruction words in your discipline. Many schools have past exam papers in the library, under the ‘Subject Readings’ tab.

THE DAY OF THE EXAMINATION

Here are some suggestions on what to do once inside the examination room:

- Don’t panic when you read exam questions. Almost every exam question is linked with something covered in the course. You just have to work out the link.
- Time in exams is a crucial factor: you need to have a very clear plan of how you intend to use your time. You will be able to work quickly if you have prepared well and if you plan your answers so that you know what is coming next in your argument.
- Have a time plan for the exam. That is, divide the time available by the number of questions allowing time at the end to check your answers. If the questions are worth different amounts you should also allow more time for the questions worth more marks.
- Scan through the paper finding questions you have prepared for.
- Answer your best question first.
- Start roughing out answers as soon as possible if this will help to “unfreeze” you.
- Leave a space after each question so that you have the space to say more if you have left something out, or if you have time left over.
- Don’t run wildly over your deadlines: you will not earn enough extra marks in a question to compensate for not adequately covering another question.
- Do your best to write legibly. Remember to only use point form when you are halfway through a question and have almost run out of time. But don’t run out of time completely!



Instruction word	Meaning
Analyse	<i>To find the main ideas, how they are related and why they are important.</i>
Comment on	<i>To discuss, criticise, or explain its meaning as completely as possible.</i>
Compare	<i>To show both the differences and the similarities.</i>
Contrast	<i>To compare by showing the differences.</i>
Criticise	<i>To give your judgement or reasoned opinion of something, showing its good and bad points. It is not necessary to attack it.</i>
Define	<i>To give the formal meaning by distinguishing it from related terms. This is often a matter of giving a memorised definition.</i>
Describe	<i>To write a detailed account or verbal picture in a logical sequence.</i>
Diagram	<i>To make a graph, chart or drawing. Be sure to label it and add a brief explanation if necessary.</i>
Discuss	<i>To describe, giving the details and explaining the positives and negatives of it.</i>
Enumerate	<i>To list. Name and list the main ideas one by one.</i>
Evaluate	<i>To give your opinion or some expert's opinion of the truth or importance of the concept. Show the advantages and disadvantages.</i>
Illustrate	<i>To explain or make clear by concrete examples, comparisons or analogies.</i>
Interpret	<i>To give the meaning using examples and personal comments to make it clear.</i>
Justify	<i>To give a statement of why you think it is so. Give reasons for your statement or conclusion.</i>
List	<i>To produce a list of words, sentences or comments. Same as enumerate.</i>
Outline	<i>To give a general summary. It should contain a series of main ideas supported by secondary facts. Show the organisation of the idea.</i>
Prove	<i>To show by argument or logic that it is true. The word 'prove' has a very special meaning in maths and physics.</i>
Relate	<i>To show the connection between things, telling how one causes or is like another.</i>
Review	<i>To give a survey or summary in which you look at the important parts and criticise if necessary.</i>
State	<i>To describe the main points in precise terms. Use brief, clear sentences.</i>
Summarise	<i>To give a brief, condensed account of the main ideas.</i>
Trace	<i>To follow the progress or history of the subject.</i>

