



Studying for examinations

Writing summaries

Generally, exam questions are designed to test your understanding of the course content rather than to test your ability to memorise lectures and textbooks. Since this is the case, it is important that you aim to understand your course materials when preparing for exams rather than just to memorise them. Preparing for exams is a constructive process, which involves you identifying key points, and trying to work out what questions you might be asked. Memorising should come after understanding.

USEFUL STAGES OF SUMMARISING

- Make a single set of notes for each topic based on your various sources such as your lecture notes, textbooks, copies of articles, subject resources.
- Summarise these notes again to produce a single summary page of key points for that topic.
- Summarise these single page summaries together to produce a single master summary page which outlines the main subject matter for that whole section of the course.

When writing summaries it is very tempting to note down the page number of the article or text book and simply copy the material directly into your notebook. After all, the writer of the article or text book is no doubt an expert in the field, so why not copy his or her words? There are several problems with this approach. One obvious problem is you risk plagiarising the material, and while you should still provide references for your sources when summarising, this is not expected to the same extent under exam conditions. Another very significant problem with the copying approach is that you fail to engage with the material: writing a summary of the material forces you to ensure that you understand the text. What's more, summarising relevant information helps you save time; that is, you won't waste your time copying out long passages from the original.

If you find that you fall into the trap of copying out sections from your sources rather than summarising, you could try the following steps when writing summaries.

- Quickly read through the text to see whether it is relevant to your topic; if you are working with a photocopy or an electronic copy, you may want to underline or highlight the main points as you read. *Never do this with borrowed material!*
- Read the text again, making a note of the main points.
- Put away the original and rewrite the notes in your own words.
- Begin your summary: restate the main idea at the beginning of your summary, indicating your source; mention other major points; if necessary, change the order of the points to make construction more logical.
- Re-read your summary to check that you have included all the important information and that it is expressed in clear, simple sentences.

Needless to say, writing summaries is a constructive process which requires a lot of hard work. However, for exam preparation it is a valuable activity as it reduces your course content down to the essentials.

SAMPLE SUMMARY

The summary below uses headings, a numbering system, underlining, and point form to note down the important facts from the text. Even though this is a straightforward text, you can see that the writer not only notes down the facts (types of solids) but draws out a key concept, that is, the behaviour of atoms, then uses this to explain the differences between the types of matter.

Sample text	Summary
<p>All matter may be classified as either solid, liquid or gas. Solids are firm and have a definite form. Rubber, wood, glass, iron, cotton, and sand are all classified as solids. As the atoms or molecules of a solid are densely packed, and as they have very little freedom of movement, most solids require a considerable force in order to change their shape or volume.</p> <p>Solids may be further divided into two classes: crystalline and amorphous. Crystalline solids include rocks, wood, paper and cotton. These solids are made up of atoms arranged in a definite pattern. When they are heated, the change to a liquid, known as melting, is sharp and clear.</p> <p>Amorphous solids include rubber, glass and sulphur. In these substances the pattern of the atoms is not orderly, and when they are heated, they gradually soften.</p> <p>Liquids, on the other hand, are not rigid. If water, milk, or oil is poured on a table, it will flow all over the surface. The atoms or molecules of liquids attract each other and thereby enable liquids to flow. However, these atoms are loosely structured and they do not keep their shape. Therefore, a liquid will take the shape of any container in which it is poured.</p> <p>Gases, such as air, oxygen, and carbon dioxide, have no fixed shape or volume of their own. They diffuse as they spread out to fill any container. If water is put into a tyre, it will run to the bottom; if air is put into a tyre, it fills the whole space inside. The atoms or molecules of gases are widely spaced and move very rapidly. They therefore expand or compress to fit any area</p>	<p><i>What is matter? either 1. solid. 2. liquid. or 3. gas.</i></p> <p><i>1. Solids atoms densely packed SO they can't move THEREFORE can't change shape without force</i></p> <p><i>Two classes of solids: Chrystalline: examples: rock, wood, paper, cotton. When heated, change to clear liquid. Amorphous: examples: rubber, glass, sulphur. Atoms not orderly, SO when heated they soften (different to chrystalline)</i></p> <p><i>2. Liquids unlike solids - not rigid Atoms of l. attract each other, AS A RESULT liquids flow. Also, atoms loosely structured, so liquids change shape</i></p> <p><i>3. Gases eg oxygen carbon dioxide no fixed shape so can diffuse-spread out Atoms of g. widely spaced, move rapidly SO can expand to fill areas.</i></p>

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