

Some General Remarks About Exams

Before the Exam

1. Find out what the exam will cover. This will serve you as a guide for reviewing.
 - No exam covers everything taught in a course.
2. Find out what kind of exam it will be: objective, essay or a combination of both.
 - If it is an essay exam, find out if it will consist entirely of short essays, long essays or a combination of both.
 - Objective exams require a specific type of response from you; essay exams require something just as specific, but different. There are successful techniques for preparing for and taking each kind.
3. Reviewing is a big obstacle, largely because the task looks so large that the human tendency is to postpone it. This leads to the all-night cram session, which sends you into the exam with a blurred mind filled with a jumble of facts and no sense of preparation. (There is however, such a thing as sensible cramming: see below.)

Start reviewing methodically and fairly early. Make human nature work for you.

a) On reviewing methodically:

- Separate review time from work on daily assignments.
- Review in short sessions everyday – at the most, two hours at a time. (If you work more than that, brain-fatigue sets in and you waste time. If you must work more than that, give yourself a deliberate, unexciting break of ten or fifteen minutes, before you start again. (If you are interested in why this is good advice, read pages 31-36 in *How to Study and Take Exams* by Lincoln Pettit.)
- Divide the review material in each course into logical sections and concentrate on one at a time.

Terminology is a good place to start, if you are weak on it.

- Relieve your mind by reviewing your worst subject first. Much of what is called review is really learning something for the first time, and naturally, this will take the most effort.
- Re-review your toughest subject just before the exam day, or even the night before. This is a sensible form of cramming because it is really review.

b) On reviewing early:

There is such a thing as reviewing too early, if you have not been thoroughly on top of the material since the course began. The average person may not remember everything from previous lectures. The best time to start is probably about two weeks before a major exam if you are weak in the subject. Otherwise, a week before the exam is sufficient if you are moderately sure of yourself.

4. Make sure you know certain elementary facts about the exam, such as where it is, what you are expected and allowed to bring with you. Then get there early with the appropriate materials.

During the Exam

1. Before you start writing:

a) Glance at the whole exam. This does two things for you:

It gives you a “set” on the exam: what it covers, where the emphasis lies, and what the main ideas seem to be. Many exams are composed of a series of short questions all related to one particular aspect of the subject, and then a longer one developing some ideas from another area.

- b) OBSERVE THE POINT VALUE OF THE QUESTIONS and then figure out a rough time allowance. If the total point value for the test is 100, then a 50-point question is worth about half of your time, regardless of how many questions there are. A quick rule of thumb for a one-hour test is to divide the point value in half.
- c) UNDERLINE ALL SIGNIFICANT WORDS IN THE DIRECTIONS
- Many careless students have penalized themselves because they did not see the word “or” in the question. “Answer 1, 2, OR 3”. You do not get extra credit for answering three questions in this case.
 - “Enumerate” means to count off or name one by one (as defined in Webster’s Dictionary). That does not mean to “discuss”. (See the accompanying handout on “Common Key-Words used in Essay Question”.)
 - If you do not clearly understand the directions, ask the professor.
2. When you begin your work:
- a) Tackle the question in the order that appeals to you most. There is nothing sacred about the order in which the questions are asked. Doing well on a question that you feel relatively sure of will be reassuring and will free your mind of tension. The act of writing often unlocks the temporarily blocked mental processes; once you finish that question you will probably find others less formidable. On the other hand, you may be the type of person who wants to get the big one off his mind first, and have the easy ones “for dessert”. If you are writing in an exam book, be sure to identify the questions clearly.
- b) Keep the point value and time allowance in mind.
This may save you from a very common and panic-producing mistake such as taking twenty minutes of an hour-long test to answer a five-point question, and then finding you have five minutes to answer a twenty-point question. It is impossible to score more than five points on a five-point question!
- c) Work methodically, forcing yourself if necessary to do so. If you tend to rush at things, slow down. If you tend to dawdle, pace yourself.
3. When you are finished, it will be very useful to check over our work. Reasons for doing this are:
- To see if you have left out any questions you meant to tackle later, also to see if you have followed directions.
 - To catch careless errors. Note: do not take time to copy answers unless you are sure they are illegible. You are not graded on neatness, but on accuracy.

After the Exam

An excellent way to learn how to take exams is to analyze what you have done on previous ones. When you get your paper back, go over it, noting not only what you did wrong, but why. An hour to two spent in this way may be extremely valuable. See if you detect any point-eating tendencies, such as getting the main idea and then rushing sloppily through the proofs, simply not following directions, bogging down on relatively unimportant items, or misreading questions entirely. The next time you face an exam, consciously watch yourself for the weaknesses.

Also, note what you did right! This may save you hours of worry the next time around. That question on the English test that haunted you for several days may prove to be the one you did best on. Why did it get such good reception? Often, such analysis proves genuinely reassuring.