

# 16 Preparing for exams

Toward the end of the semester/term students often have to take, or sit, exams. Exams test students on what they've learned during the semester/term. These can be stressful for many students. Here are some tips to help you do your best and stay calm.

## Types of exams

### Timed exams

Most exams are timed, that is, they have a start time and students have to try to finish everything in a set amount of time. Once the time is up, students have to put down their pens and stop writing. This time pressure can make exams more stressful. During this kind of exam, you can't usually refer to any notes or textbooks. Students have to use what they've learned and remembered. International students may be given permission to use dictionaries for some timed exams, but check this in your course syllabus or with your examinations office. This chapter offers some advice on how to prepare for these types of exams.

### Open book exams

In an open book exam, you're allowed to bring in any notes or books you want. Open book exams do not test how good you are at memorizing information. They test how well you understand what you have learned in classes, and how efficient you are at looking up and using information.

If you have an open book exam, make sure you can easily find the information you need to answer the questions. If you bring in a huge, disorganized pile of books and notes,

you may spend too much time looking for information and not enough writing your answers! It can help to:

- organize the materials you bring to the exam. Make a list of main topics and where to find information on each one (e.g. relevant page numbers in your textbook, the date of the lecture which covered that topic). This is like a contents page for all the materials you have;
- write clear summaries of the main topics in the class;
- put labeled tabs on your notes and textbooks to help you find information on particular topics quickly. Using colors in your notes can also help you find certain types of information (e.g. definitions highlighted in green).

### **Take home exams**

In a take home exam, your professor/lecturer will give you the exam paper to take away with you. Like open book exams, take home exams aren't testing your memory. They're testing how well you can find information and use it to answer the questions. You'll be given a fixed length of time to complete the exam, using whatever materials you want.

### **Practical details**

When attending timed exams, you should find out:

- where the exam will be held;
- if you need to arrive earlier than the start of the exam;
- how to get to the exam venue;
- how much time you have to finish the exam;
- what you're allowed to bring to the exam;
- whether students get "reading time" at the start of the exam. Sometimes you're allowed 5–15 minutes to read the test questions before you start to write;
- whether you have another exam on the same day. How long is the break between the two exams?

### **What will the exam look like?**

You also need to familiarize yourself with the format of the exam. Find out:

- Is it a written exam or an oral exam?
- How many questions will there be? How many points are allocated for each question?
- What style of questions will be asked?

Exam papers are often divided into sections. Each section is worth a different percentage of your total grade, or mark. Each section may have different types of questions. Common types of questions include:

- multiple choice;
- short answer;
- essays.

Depending on your class, you may also be asked to draw diagrams, sketches, or graphs, do calculations using formulas, and other tasks. Find out as much as you can about the exam and look at past papers so that you know what to expect. These are often made available online on your Virtual Learning Environment.

### **How to study**

Make sure you review everything you need. Start with the course outline for the subject you need to review. You should have received this from your professor/lecturer at the start of the course. It will probably be available online as well. The course outline lists the topics which were covered in each class.

Gather together all of the materials for the subject you're reviewing. This includes notes you took during classes, your textbook, and any other materials your professor/lecturer gave you or recommended that you read. Read through these topic by topic, listing key ideas and writing summaries of what was

covered for each topic. Make special note of anything your professor/lecturer covered in depth or mentioned many times, because this means it'll be on the exam.

Draw up a revision timetable to make sure you study all of the broad topics on the course outline. It often helps to do this visually, in a flowchart or concept map.

Are there past exam papers for your subject? Check that they're similar in content and format to the exam you'll be doing. If so, practice doing them, using your notes to refer to if you need them.

When you go through your materials, try writing your own exam questions. This is a good way to memorize material. Test yourself using these made-up questions. At first let yourself look up the answers in your notes; later try to answer them from memory.

If you'll be asked to write essays or long answers in your exam, you need to practice writing these. Take essay or long answer questions from past exam papers or make up your own, and practice writing them. Time how long this takes.

Form a study group with friends who are taking the same exam. Practice explaining important topics to each other: this is a good way to check how well you understand them. Come up with questions and test each other.

### **What not to do**

#### **Don't:**

- Don't just read your notes over and over or copy them out and hope this will help you remember the information. This isn't an efficient way of learning for most students. You need to practice retrieving information from memory. This will help you remember it on the exam.
- Don't leave your revision too late! You should start studying for an exam at least a few days before it takes place.

## Staying calm and healthy

Make sure you're as well-rested, healthy, and calm as possible during the exam period.

- Leave yourself enough time to study for exams. Don't leave studying until the last minute: this is very stressful!
- Get plenty of sleep, especially on the night before an exam. Sleep is just as important as studying. You won't perform well if you're tired because you've been reviewing when you should have been sleeping.
- Drink plenty of water and have healthy, regular meals. Make sure you eat fruit and vegetables every day. If you need to snack, avoid junk food: have yogurt, fruit, nuts, or other nutritious foods instead.
- Take regular breaks. You'll study more effectively if you give yourself time out now and then to have a snack, take a short walk, etc. A little bit of exercise is a good idea.
- Avoid alcohol or excessive caffeine the night before the exam. Some students think lots of coffee or caffeine pills will help them remember and stay alert as they review their materials. However they'll leave you feeling nervous and unable to sleep.

### Dealing with exam stress

If you feel very anxious and stressed about your exams, it may help to:

- exercise. Go for a walk or swim, play some sports, do some yoga, dancing, or other physical activity you enjoy;
- sit down and write a review plan. Knowing that you've organized the time to prepare for your exams should help you feel more secure;
- take some deep breaths;
- talk to a supportive friend or family member;

- make an appointment with your professor/lecturer. If you're stressed because you don't understand something you learned in class, make a list of specific questions and bring it to the appointment. This will make it much easier for your professor/lecturer to help you;
- consult student support services at your institution. Many colleges/universities have faculty/staff who can help you with study skills, planning your revision, and language difficulties.