

Open Book & Take Home Exams

Open Book Exam FAQ

What are Open Book Exams?

Open Book exams allow you to take notes, texts or resource materials into an exam situation. Open Book exams test your ability to find and apply information and knowledge. They are often used in subjects requiring direct reference to written materials, like law statutes, statistics or acts of parliament.

Open Book exams usually come in two forms:

- Traditional sit-down/ limited-time exams, with varying degrees of access to resources and references.
- Take Home exams—Open Book exams you do at home. Question(s) are handed out, answers are attempted without help from others, and the exam is returned within a specified period of time (often the next day).

What Kinds of Material Can Be Used?

The materials you can take into an Open Book exam can vary. Some Open Book exams restrict the type of materials (e.g. formula sheets and tables or a limited number of texts). Others may be totally unrestricted (any quantity of any material).

Materials might be:

- your notes
- readings, reference materials or textbooks
- equipment like calculators, drafting tools etc.

Materials used in Take Home exams are usually unrestricted. Check in your course notes or with your lecturer to find out what you can use in a Take Home exam. The main restriction for Take Home exams is that they must be your work—you must attempt them by yourself without any help from others.

Why Are Some Exams ‘Open Book’?

Some exams are Open Book because they test for more than just rote-learning. Higher education is supposed to equip you with intellectual abilities and skills. At university, simply memorising and reproducing information is not enough. Open Book exams test your ability to quickly find relevant information and then to understand, analyse, apply knowledge and think critically.

What Kinds of Questions will an Open Book Exam Have?

Open Book Exams do not test your memory. They test your ability to find and use information for problem-solving, and to deliver well-structured and well-presented arguments and solutions.

Open Book exam questions usually require you to apply knowledge rather than just reproduce facts. They may be essay-style questions or involve problem-solving or delivering solutions. The style of question depends on the faculty or school setting the exam. For example in Law, the questions may set up a hypothetical fact situation that you will need to discuss.



Myths About Open Book Exams

Myth No. 1: Open Book exams are a breeze

Don't underestimate Open Book or Take Home exams; they are not an easy option. Answering the questions well requires more than just copying information straight from the texts. For example, having access to a textbook can stop you from giving a wrong answer if you can't remember a fact or formula, but just getting that fact correct won't get you good marks. In Open Book exams, it's how you locate, apply and use the information that is important.

Myth No. 2: You don't have to study

Probably the biggest misconception about Open Book exams is that there is no need to study anything. You should study for Open Book exams just as you would for any other exam. Having books and notes to refer to might mean you don't have to memorise as much information, but you still need to be able to apply it effectively. This means you must fully understand and be familiar with the content and materials of your course so you can find and use the appropriate information. In Open Book exams, you need to quickly locate the information you need in the resources you have. If you don't study you won't be able to locate relevant information—you won't know where it is.

Myth No. 3: You can just copy straight from the book!

You can't copy chunks of text directly from textbooks or notes. This counts as plagiarism, just as it does in your other assignments. In Open Book exams, the resource materials are made available to you, so you are expected to do more than just reproduce them. You must be able to find, interpret and apply the information in your sources to the exam questions. You usually need to reference as well, just as you would for any other assignment.

Myth No. 4: The more materials the better!

Students tend to get carried away and take too many materials and resources into the exam with them. Don't overload with materials. Only take what you need into an Open Book exam. Stacks of books won't necessarily guarantee your performance, and you won't have time for extensive reading. Too many materials can end up distracting you and crowding up your work space. Carefully select your materials and organise them for quick reference.

Doing Well in Open Book Exams

Open Book exams require you to:

- learn for understanding rather than just remembering
- understand how to find information
- make good notes and organise materials for fast reference
- apply the information in your sources to the questions

Study

You need to study for Open Book exams just as you would for any exam. If you know your subject, you'll have a knowledge base to draw on. You will also understand how and why topics are linked. This style of learning equips you well for exams and 'real life' experiences. If you don't study you won't know how to find answers and—books or no books—you can't answer the questions.

Familiarise yourself with texts and notes, and make sure you can locate important information. Be familiar with your materials so you will not waste valuable exam time searching through them.

Prepare your environment

Plan ahead and work out the materials and resources you will take into the exam room.

Find out the exam requirements

For Open Book exams, find out:

- the materials you can take into the exam room
- how much time you have
- the topic areas the exam will cover
- how long answers should be
- if you need to reference
- the types of questions—essays, short answers etc.

For Take Home exams, find out:

- the time and date the exam should be handed in
- where the exam should be handed in
- how much time you have to complete the exam
- the topic areas the exam will cover
- how long answers should be
- if you need to reference
- the types of questions—essays, short answers etc.

Don't overload with materials. Only take what you need into an Open Book exam. Carefully select your materials and resources and organise them for quick reference. The same goes for writing implements. Make sure you have spare pens, pencils and erasers. If you need any other tools, make sure they all work and pack them neatly. For those using non-solar calculators, don't forget spare batteries!

If you are doing a Take Home exam, gather readings, notes and resources together beforehand and organise them neatly in your study area at home. Make sure you have enough paper, pens etc. Set up a quiet space where you can concentrate, and where you can work without interruptions.

Prepare Notes & Materials



Organise

A large amount of materials might make you feel secure, but you'll probably work best relying on no more than a few pages of notes and a few well-chosen texts.

Spend some time making your reference materials as user-friendly as possible so that you don't waste time frantically flipping pages back and forth or shuffling papers. Unless you're sitting a Take Home exam, you'll need to work within a short time limit (a few hours). To do this well, try to have the essential facts, formulae, etc. at your finger tips. Also, writing a flow chart to show how the relevant topics are connected is very helpful.

Preparing Resources

Before the exam:

- Use tables of contents and index pages to locate relevant sections in the books you plan to use.
- Bookmark useful chapters or pages. Post-it notes can be helpful here.
- Prepare brief summaries, e.g. in margins of texts to provide a quick reference.
- Prepare a list of key information (formulae, key definitions etc.) likely to be used.
- Use index cards to list key topics and relevant page numbers of texts. Use one card per book. This can help you find information quickly.

Preparing Notes

Make some useful notes for yourself:

- Review the subject to get a good overview.
- Work out the main themes and topics.
- Identify key concepts or information.
- Make brief and legible notes.
- Summarise important information.
- Use clear headings.
- Organise notes by topic.
- Identify *how* topics are connected.

Don't anticipate questions

When you prepare your notes, don't waste time guessing possible questions or trying to prepare 'model' answers—preprepared answers don't work. Essay style questions will tend toward a 'free' response rather than a fixed 'single right answer' question, so formula answers don't fit. However, you do need to have 'thought through' conceptual frameworks and philosophical positions, and have some general conclusions in mind. You don't need to know everything, but you need to know how to find the relevant information.

Practise

Your lecturer or tutor may provide some sample questions or a dry run. You might also want to check out some past exam papers in the Library.

Get a Good Night's Sleep

On the night before the exam, don't stay up until all hours studying. You'll be fuzzy, stressed and unable to think clearly.



Sitting the Exam

Don't panic

It is OK to be nervous, but don't panic. An Open Book exam is another form of intellectual analysis. It is not very different from preparing an assignment at home, except that time is more limited. Before you go into the exam, avoid panic talk with other students about how nervous you may be feeling.

Eat something

You might feel too nervous to eat, but your brain needs fuel! If you don't eat, halfway through the exam you'll find yourself feeling tired, hungry and losing concentration. It's also a good idea to take some bottled water into the exam room.

If you're sitting a Take Home exam:

- don't forget to eat lunch or dinner
- take a break every couple of hours
- drink plenty of water

Read all the questions carefully

Before you start the exam, make sure you read all the questions carefully and understand what it is you are being asked to do.

Use the exam time wisely

Answer the 'easy' questions first. Starting with the 'hard' questions (questions you are unsure of) slows you down and can leave you with insufficient time to address the others that you can do well in.

Don't use too many quotations

Don't copy long chunks from the text or waste time quoting extensively. Use very few quotations—your own analysis is more important. Use the time and information to build a well-constructed answer.

Don't over-answer

With lots of materials available, it can be tempting to over-write. Remember that more is not always better. Answer the question, and aim for concise, accurate, thoughtful answers that make good use of supporting evidence.

Open Book Exam Checklist

- Find out the exam requirements
- Find out practical details (time, place etc.)

Preparation

- Study your course materials
- Work out the materials and resources you will use
- If you're doing a Take Home exam, prepare your study area
- Prepare useful notes
- Organise your materials
- Get a good night's sleep

On the Day

- Don't panic
- Only take in what you really need
- Eat something
- Arrive in good time
- Avoid 'panic talk'
- Read all the exam questions carefully
- Start with the easy ones
- Use quotations sparingly
- Don't over-answer
- Be aware of the time

Further Reading

Centre for The Development of Teaching & Learning, National University of Singapore, *Open Book Exams*, <<http://www.cdtl.nus.edu.sg/publications/obe/>>

Northedge, A., *The Good Study Guide*, 1990, Open University, Milton Keynes

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