

Surviving Exams

The Learning Centre • <http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au>



Exam performance is a skill, not a talent. Doing well can have as much to do with technique as with preparation. The advice in this guide may seem like 'common sense', but sense can be the first thing to go when looking down the barrel of exam week. What follows are some practical survival skills for exams.

The 24-Hours Before...

Make sure you get a good night's sleep

This is the most important by far. If you are well rested, you will think more clearly, remember better, and will be more able to solve problems. Do some study the night before, but don't pull an all-nighter—you'll be fuzzy, stressed and irritable. In an exam, being alert is your greatest asset.

Eat something

Your stomach might be in knots, but if you don't eat before the exam, you'll get halfway through and feel tired, hungry and distracted. Even if you've lost your appetite, eat some easily digestible solid food like rice, bread, savoury biscuits or bananas. Keep coffee and chocolate to a minimum as these will only give a short boost. You need staying power.

Bring all the materials you need

Make a list of the equipment you will need for the exam and pack your bag the night before. Check off each item as you pack it. For an open book exam, bring your materials neatly organised; a jumble of notes isn't helpful—effective organisation (thematic, topic-based, chronological, etc.) is. Bring several pens in case one runs out at the crucial moment.

Arrive at the exam venue ahead of time

Establish the location of the exam venue well ahead of time. Make sure you know how to get there with the minimum of stress. Visit the venue a few days before the exam and familiarise yourself with the physical surroundings.

Avoid panic talk!

For some perverse reason, many students seem to enjoy stressing each other out just before the exam. Avoid conversations with other students about how little study they have done, how nervous they are feeling or how difficult they think the exam will be. A suggestion: when waiting to enter the exam, stand apart from the main scrum of students.

Confidence is all . . .

Confidence is a state of mind; calm, collected, and able to handle challenges. So, you've arrived at the exam with good preparation, a good night's sleep and having eaten something. You are on time, and have actively avoided panicky chitchat. What now?

Don't rush—relax

It's OK to be nervous. Exams are stressful and if you are too casual, you won't be alert. But being *too* nervous can mean you're too agitated to concentrate. You need to be somewhere in the middle: calm but on your toes. During the exam, pause and relax yourself:

- Take a few long, slow deep breaths
- As you slowly exhale, relax your shoulders, hands, face and jaw



- Stay quiet for a few moments, then go back to what you were doing, only more slowly and smoothly.

Use the exam reading period to your advantage

Exams often have reading periods (5-10 mins) so use them well and read the exam questions thoroughly. It is vital to fully understand exam questions and above all, to answer them. Read carefully and slowly, and consider what you are being asked to do. Even if there is no reading period, you should still spend the first few minutes reading the questions.

Get a feel for the exam as a whole: Read through the entire exam before you start. This gives you a feel for what you need to do and the time constraints involved.

Using Clue Words: Few questions require you to write everything you've ever read about a certain topic, so look for the *clue words* in the question. These will give you a strong indication of how you should answer the question.

If you are allowed to hold a pen during the reading period, underline the clue words in short answer and essay questions. Doing this will provide guidelines for answering when you return to the question later.

Read the directions: The importance of doing this can't be overstated. There is nothing worse than getting to the end of the exam and suddenly realising that you were supposed to answer *two* questions in Part A when you had instead written just *one* masterpiece. Exam writing is a game—you are being tested as much for your ability to follow directions as for your handling of the material itself.

Prioritise the Questions

During your initial read-through, locate the 'easy' and 'hard' questions. Start with the easy ones. Don't do the hard ones first to get them out of the way. This slows you down and stresses you out. Answering an easy question increases your confidence, helps get you thinking and triggers your memory. This might help you to remember information for those 'difficult' questions.

In the End . . .

Exam writing is an active process. You are there to think, assess, make judgements, and to concisely answer questions. Simple regurgitation will only get you so far.

Remember the Golden Rules

- Get some sleep the night before
- Eat something
- Avoid panic talk
- Make a time management plan and stick to it
- Read the exam directions
- Watch the clock
- Build in revision time and don't leave early
- Take control of your stress and make it work for you!

Exam Time Management

Prioritise questions

When you read through the exam, check the mark allocations. Note the number of marks per question and how many questions you have to answer and ration your time accordingly. Make a quick note of how much time you should give to each question.

The number of marks given to a particular question will indicate how much time you should spend on it. For example:

- in a 90-minute exam with 90 multiple choice questions, average one question per minute;
- if an essay question is worth 60%, then 60% of exam time should be spent on it.

Answer the 'easy' ones first

Answering the 'easy' questions first usually buys extra time to devote to the ones you find more difficult.

Watch the clock

Once you decide on your time outline, stick to it. Watch the clock, and once the allocated time has elapsed, move onto the next question.

If you haven't finished, leave plenty of space in the exam booklet. If you have any extra time at the end you can return and answer more fully.

Don't Leave Early

If you have extra time, use it to revise or to think more deeply about one of the harder questions. Make use of all the allocated time—it's worth it.