

Exam day tips

How to perform successfully on exam day

To prepare well for exams you need to manage your academic work load throughout semester and revise early and effectively (see our *Exam revision* pamphlet). But even well prepared students can feel uneasy as exam days approach.

This pamphlet gives a number of tips to ensure you feel in control and perform at your best – despite the stresses of exams.

Get prepared

Two to three weeks before the start of exams:

- Check the latest exam timetable for the date, time, room and what (eg. calculators, notes, etc) can be taken into each exam. Look out for any last minute changes.
- Review old exam papers. Get to know the format, types of questions and scope of topics covered.
- Attend exam revision lectures and take special note of any tips that your lecturers might give. Find out about any exam hurdle requirements.
- Practise answering exam questions within the time limits and under similar conditions as you will experience in the exam.
- Practise some stress management and/or relaxation techniques (see our *Stress management* pamphlet)
- Consult the Disability Liaison Unit about alternative exam arrangements as early as possible if you have a disability or ongoing medical condition.
- Apply for Special Consideration through SIS (Student Information System) online if you have experienced **exceptional** circumstances that you believe will affect your exam performance.

During swot vac

In order to work effectively during swot vac decide what you need to get done, make yourself a revision timetable and stick to it. Make sure your revision is task focused and not too general in scope.



If you find that you're distracted or lacking motivation, working with other students studying the same subject can be an effective way of revising.

However, don't burn yourself out before the exams have even started. Pay attention to your diet, drink lots of water, exercise (but not to distraction) and, above all, try to get at least 7 hours sleep each night.

Also, when studying throughout swot vac, be mindful of the times of your exams. It is worth trying to practise concentrating and being alert at those times of day. For example, be aware that you will not perform well in a 9.00am exam if, throughout swot vac, you have been studying until late at night, falling into bed at 4.00am and getting up around noon.

The night before the exam

Don't spend the night before an exam trying to cram in more or new information. At this stage, it's best just to work with the exam notes or flash cards you have made during revision sessions.

- List or recite the main points on a topic and then check your recall against your notes.
- Look over your essay plans, formulae and/or any mnemonics you have devised.
- Pack your bag for the next day, eat a good meal and try to get a good night's sleep.

If you feel anxious about the limits of your knowledge, remind yourself that you will earn more marks by being refreshed and alert in the exam than by trying to cram another topic into your short-term memory. Often short-term cramming does not work. It's better to know well what you have learned over the longer term than to panic and exhaust yourself at the last minute.

On exam day

Allow plenty of time in the morning to get yourself ready to leave on time for the exam.

Have a healthy meal – preferably with protein and complex carbohydrates (low GI) that will provide slow energy release over several hours.

Take water and barley sugar with you to sustain you through a 3-hour exam.

Dress appropriately for the weather and remember that exam rooms can sometimes be a little extreme in temperature, so be prepared.

Make sure you take your student card and appropriate writing instruments (pens, pencils, ruler, eraser, etc).

Arrive in good time but don't talk with other students about the topics or the exam. This may confuse you and will certainly contribute to exam anxieties. Perhaps talk about what you might all do after the exam.

As the nerves build, focus on staying as relaxed as possible. Wriggling your fingers and toes will keep muscles loose, deep breathing can reduce anxiety and chewing gum can help to prevent tension building in your jaw and neck.

During reading time

Get an overview of the entire paper by scanning through it quickly first.

Read the instructions VERY carefully and work out how many questions you need to answer.

Calculate the time you can spend on each answer relative to its mark value. For example, if question 1 carries 20% of the marks for a 3-hour paper, you should spend about 35 minutes on it. Allow yourself 10-15 minutes review time for the end.

Decide which questions are the best ones to attempt. Skim the paper again and tick any questions you feel you could attempt. Then go back and read these carefully.

Decide the order in which you will respond. The general rule is to start on the one that seems easiest to you. Also, plan to attempt the ones worth most marks reasonably early. Leave the ones you are least sure about until last; you may get some ideas about them along the way.

If you have any time left, **analyse the questions** you will attempt. Ask: What exactly is the question asking? Can it be broken down into parts? Can I restate it in simpler terms? How does it relate to the semester's work? What information is provided? Are there any clues elsewhere in the paper?

During writing time

As soon as you can, **write a few things down:**

- List, in order, the questions you will attempt
- Write your time allowance per question
- Write out formulae, key terms, lists or plans you have memorised and note which questions you will apply them to

Re-read your question and plan your answer. Don't rush or feel you have to begin writing an answer straight away.

Some students prefer to **write a brief outline** of their planned response for each question before they begin writing detailed responses. This may help if you know your concentration wanes over time. Also, if you have a mental blank later, you have your outline to refer to.

Stick to your allocated time for each answer – if you get stuck, move on.

If, despite your best efforts, you run out of time, jot down notes on how you would have proceeded to solve the problem or answer the question. Point form is fine at this stage.

If you have no idea of the answer, don't leave a blank. Write down *anything* you can think of that is related to the question.

Tips for maximising your exam marks

- Avoid spending too long on difficult questions for which your answer may or may not be correct, especially at the expense of running out of time to attempt the questions you are more confident about.
- Be sure to answer the question asked. No matter how brilliant your response, it will earn ZERO marks if it does not relate to the question.
- Answer all parts of the question. Be aware that essay or short answer questions can contain parts. For example, 'How and why are contemporary romantic films different from those of the classic Hollywood period?' Be sure to discuss *both* 'How' and 'why'.
- Try to identify how the marks have been allocated. For example, if you are asked to explain 4 causes of heart disease and the question is worth 20 marks, it is likely that 5 marks are available for each of the causes you discuss.
- Make sure your writing is legible. Examiners are under time constraints too. If they are struggling to read your writing it may seem to them your ideas are unclear.
- For mathematical or scientific calculations, check your responses carefully. For written responses check that your ideas are clear and on target. Everyone makes simple mistakes when under pressure and you will lose 'easy' marks if you leave out a key word or misplace a decimal point.

After the exam

Some students enjoy talking with others about their answers to exam questions. Beware – this may increase *your* exam anxieties and shatter the confidence you had developed.

Nothing you do after the exam will change your mark for that exam so *don't agonise*. Do something relaxing, something you know you will enjoy, immediately after an exam.

After you've had a break, however, it's worth reviewing your performance. Remember that the aim here is not to agonise over 'what you could have done' but rather to identify where you could improve your results next time. Reflect:

- Were you sufficiently prepared?
- Which areas of exam revision or rehearsal could you improve?
- Was stress management an issue?
- Did you manage your time in the exam effectively?

Also, after the exams have been marked, it may be useful to work with a tutor, other students or a learning skills adviser to identify where you could have gained extra marks.

What will your exam strategy be next time?

Further information

The Examinations Unit in Student Administration, First floor Raymond Priestly Building

<http://www.studentadmin.unimelb.edu.au/student/exams/#info>