

We're here to help.

Being Successful in Tertiary Exams

Learning to play the examination game takes time. Depending on how recent your exam experience has been, the thought of an exam being a major source of assessment for a unit could be quite daunting. The three key aspects to successfully completing an examination period are:

- effective exam preparation
- managing exam anxiety and stress
- effective exam technique

This fact sheet is a brief introduction into each of these areas. If you would like to know more detail about these topics, fact sheets for each are available on the web and can be downloaded at any time during the semester from: www.support-equity.utas.edu.au

EXAM PREPARATION

Being a successful exam candidate hinges on effective preparation. This involves several key management issues that you will need to eventually master.

Managing time – Scheduling time to prepare in a busy daily routine is always a challenge. Start with your priorities – how important is this exam period to you? This makes carving out the necessary time a lot clearer. Knowing which exams are due when and how much time you will need to prepare for them is the next step.

Get the necessary tools to deal with the logistics – blank timetables are available on the web. (Go to 'Useful Study Tools' at: www.support-equity.utas.edu.au to download a Weekly Planner).

Managing space – Physical space and effective study go together. Just as it is hard to sleep on the kitchen table while people are preparing dinner, it is also hard to study in an ineffective, poorly designed space!

Managing motivation – Exams provide a great opportunity to summarise what you have learnt for the semester and can fuel a motivation for learning. Harnessing healthy anxiety can be a valuable resource in this area as well. Keeping stress levels under control is the way to do this effectively.

Managing the unknown – Find out the nature of your exam and be aware of the difference in approaching each type of standard exam format – multiple-choice vs problem solving vs essays vs short answer vs practical/oral. There should be nothing about the nature of the exam that takes you by surprise in the exam room. Using past exam papers as guides can help in knowing what to expect. Past exam papers are available via the library, school or often online at:

www.utas.edu.au/library/info/exams.html

Managing revision – The key is not to make your brain bigger, but to condense the information you are trying to fit in it, and make it easier to pull out! Good revision is the art of making meaningful connections between pieces of information. Once the summary connections have been made, memorising the key points and facts becomes a lot easier. Finding a technique that works for your style of learning is important. Be creative in this area – mnemonics, concept maps, colours corresponding to key issues, diagrams, pictures/cartoons, songs and rhymes, flash cards, repetition.

MANAGING EXAM ANXIETY AND STRESS

The best exam preparation in the world can come unstuck if anxiety (worry about the future) and stress (reaction to the present) are not managed effectively. Anxiety and stress affect us physically, emotionally and psychologically. Appropriate management is a year round responsibility that should be heightened at exam time rather than just introduced! This involves at least the following:

Diet – If ‘you are what you eat’, then what you eat definitely has an affect on your memory! Diet is part of your bodily fuel. Don’t compromise at exam time when you most need that fuel.

Sleep – Routine and regularity is a key with good sleeping patterns. Our mind is working while we sleep and research shows the importance of this time. Compromising healthy sleep patterns during exam times is rarely helpful.

Exercise – Research links a healthy body and a healthy mind. Study is usually a sedentary activity and must be supplemented with daily periods of physical movement. A brisk walk will aid concentration. Periods of more strenuous activity through the week are vital for aerobic development, blood flow and ultimately memory. Think of this time as an investment in your brain function!

Leisure – Maintaining some enjoyable activities during intense study periods can greatly aid the effectiveness of the study time. SWOT VAC doesn’t necessarily mean isolation from life!

It’s all in the mind...

Our approach to exams, particularly our thought processes, can enhance or ease the anxiety we feel. Being aware of our ‘self-talk’ in response to exams is an important skill which can be altered to assist rather than inhibit our efforts. It is more than just trying to ‘think positively’ about the situation. After all, if you haven’t prepared appropriately for the exam, all the positive thinking you can manage will probably not help your cause! Keeping your level of anxiety in check based on realistic thinking and helpful self-talk is an important ingredient to a successful exam period.

During the exam

Some simple stress management skills used effectively in the exam room can help to alleviate distressful symptoms. Breathing is a key resource, focusing on its rate (slow it to 10-14 breaths per minute) and place (deep in the lungs rather than shallow in the chest).

Recognising muscle tension and learning to relax it appropriately will help in writing and concentration. Simple visualisation skills such as imagining yourself being at your favourite location without any worries can help as well, allowing you to attend again to the memory recall process.

After the exam

Managing the post-exam period and preparation for the next exam is another consideration, avoiding dwelling on the negatives of exam 'debriefs' and building in appropriate breaks to enable extended concentration.

There are also fact sheets on stress and improving your sleep which you may find useful following your exams. These can be found on the web at:

www.support-equity.utas.edu.au

EFFECTIVE EXAM TECHNIQUE

While preparing thoroughly and managing the associated anxiety and stress levels goes a long way to a successful examination period, developing effective exam techniques is also important. This involves focusing on the period immediately before an exam, the reading time, exam working time and finishing time.

Just before the exam

Key issues during this time revolve around appropriate last minute revision, checking of exam place/time details and preparation of appropriate materials to take into the exam room. It is important that you are aware of the Examination Office regulations around sickness and deferred ordinary exams (for information on these go to: www.studentcentre.utas.edu.au).

Getting to the exam or making appropriate arrangements if attendance is not possible is up to you. You will need to take initiative in speaking to lecturers and the Exam Office (located within the Student Centre)

as soon as possible if you are unable to attend the exam. You must have your student card with you to be able to sit an exam. If you do not have it, you will have to go to the Student Centre before you sit your examination.

Reading time

Most written exams allow for a 15 minute reading time at the start on top of the set time limit (for example, 3 hours plus 15 minutes). This time is very valuable and learning to use it well is a developed skill. Often simple but important things are overlooked – checking it is the correct paper for your unit and that all expected parts of it are included, reading the instructions and ensuring you have the appropriate answer booklets. This period is designed to give you an overview of the paper and can allow you to set up the timing and approach to the entire exam. Use it to plan the order you will answer the questions and recheck your time allocation for each. Avoid the trap of just focusing on one section or panicking about details you can't yet remember.

Working time

When those around you are writing frantically, the temptation to spill out all your knowledge on the answer booklet pages, relevant or otherwise, is often very strong. Avoid this! A well-constructed answer with just the appropriate information included is worth far more than pages of irrelevant waffle. Taking time to plan an answer before launching into writing it, is a key to success. If you have brief notes on your answer booklet but have not had time to finish, examiners will often take these notes into account. Answering in the appropriate style is another vital issue. If the examiner is asking for an essay format, you must supply this. Neither is a short answer the same format as an essay! The format and style is as important as the information.

Time management during this part of the exam is essential. Spending too long on one section (even if it is your strongest) can jeopardise your entire exam mark. Better to leave enough time to attempt all required sections. If you are running out of time on a section, come back to it later if you have spare time at the end. Your practised stress management skills will be valuable allies during this time, helping you to maintain the high level of concentration required.

FINISHING WELL

Most exams should require the entire time allocated to complete. If you finish early, check your answers, fill in any gaps, make sure your handwriting is legible (a favourable advantage for any marker!) and check you haven't missed anything (like your student number and details on the answer booklet). Positive self-talk at this point is far more useful than negative self-berating. Focus on what you did well and prepare for the next exam with this in mind.

NEED MORE HELP?

Learning to manage examinations is a process that takes practice. Other helpful resources to improve your practice include:

- Talking with tutors and lecturers.
- Downloading the detailed fact sheets for each of the listed topics from: www.support-equity.utas.edu.au
- Attending workshops on exam management through the semester. For details go to: www.learningsupport.utas.edu.au/Workshops.htm
- Accessing online resources at: www.learningsupport.utas.edu.au/Resources.htm
- Accessing Support and Equity and Centre for Advancement of Learning and Teaching (CALT) resources.
- Talking with other students in your faculty, for example mentors.