

We're here to help.

Effective Exam Preparation

Preparing for exams is a task most students dread. It involves time and hard work and is the cause of a lot of stress and anxiety. Learning some strategies to make your preparation and revision a little more effective can be the first step towards greater exam success. Anxiety is usually about fear of the unknown. When it comes to exam preparation there is a lot you can manage to alleviate this feeling!

MANAGING TIME

Putting off revision will only make the task increasingly more difficult when you do eventually confront it. The key to accepting and dealing with these realities is time management.

- Use a blank weekly planner to organise the study period available to you. (Go to 'Useful Study Tools' at www.support-equity.utas.edu.au to download a weekly planner). Know how much your exam is worth in the marking process and allot the appropriate amount of study time to it (relative to other exams/forms of assessment).
- Set realistic limits on the amount of study you can do and allow regular breaks for rest and relaxation.
- Assign specific segments of work to each review time – this breaks the big task into smaller components and provides you with minor goals to achieve.
- Alternate harder tasks with easier ones and combine different study activities in each session – this will prevent you from wearing yourself out too quickly and getting bored.
- Try not to review for more than a couple of hours immediately before the exam – all night cramming sessions are seldom beneficial.

MANAGING SPACE

- Find a study space that works for you. A regular spot will help cue your mind for study activity. Keep a routine environment as much as possible, free from distractions (answering email, telephone etc.) and other activities.
- Make your study spot as similar to the exam room environment as possible. This helps recall of information when you are sitting in the exam room.

- Keep your study environment for study! Where possible, don't eat/sleep/relax where you study. Get up to do these things elsewhere.

- What can we bring with us to the exam?
- Where can I get copies of past exam papers for this unit?

MANAGING MOTIVATION

- Remind yourself of why you are at uni and what you hope to achieve through your degree. Picture yourself finishing the degree and looking back on this exam period with satisfaction!
- Use your exam anxiety as a built-in motivator. A certain amount of anxiety can be helpful!
- Look for the interesting parts of your study to generate an inherent fascination. The exam period is a valuable opportunity to rediscover why you are studying your chosen field.

MANAGING THE UNKNOWN

Find out as much information about the structure of your upcoming exams as possible. There should be no surprises in this area! This will involve asking your lecturers and/or tutors questions like the following:

- Where and when will the exam be held?
- How much time will be available to complete the exam?
- How many questions will there be?
- Will there be a choice of questions?
- What style will the questions be? For example; multiple-choice, problem-solving, essays, short answer, etc.
- What percentage of the total marks for the unit is the exam worth?

These questions will guide your revision and preparation. The following are suggestions and examples of how you might approach your study depending on the style of questions likely to be contained in your exam.

Multiple-choice

Many students believe that multiple-choice questions are easier because you only need to be able to recognise the correct responses. This is, however, not necessarily the case. The questions are often a lot more challenging and contain little tricks of language and content to lead astray the student who does not understand the material thoroughly. It is therefore important to study just as actively for multiple-choice questions, aiming all the time to gain a good understanding of, and the ability to recall, the information. There is likely to be a question on most of the main points in the material hence, as you revise, focus on identifying these main points and think about the types of questions which might be asked about them. If the correct answer is not obvious, use elimination to narrow the choices.

Problem-solving

Examinations in mathematics, physics, accounting and other such subjects commonly use this format of question. The best way to prepare for these exams is to do lots of problems similar to those which are likely to be on the exam. These can be found in your textbooks, your work from class and previous exam papers. The key to success in these types of exams is to have a thorough understanding of the theories and formulae which have been covered during the semester and to practise applying these to a variety of problems.

Essays

The best way to prepare for essay questions in exams is to write practice essays! As you revise your notes concentrate on identifying likely essay topics. Write these down and then for each, practise writing up a plan which sets out the major headings and a basic outline of the main ideas you would include under each. Practise actually writing the essay in a set time limit for at least one or two of these.

Short answer questions

The key to answering these questions is to write down only directly relevant information in a clear and concise way. As you revise, pick out likely exam questions from the material. Write these all out and then set yourself an amount of time equivalent to what will be available in the exam and attempt to answer them. Check your answers and identify ways in which you could have modified, shortened, or clarified your responses. If sketches or diagrams are likely to be required on the exam, practise drawing these from memory also.

Practical exams

For these types of exams especially, the best way of preparing is to practise what you will be required to do in the exam. While revision of notes and theory is obviously important, it is your ability to apply this theory in a practical way which will be tested. Try to get together with a fellow student and take turns being the 'examiner' and the 'examinee'.

The most effective final preparation is to set yourself exams or complete old exam papers under exam conditions. This will test your knowledge and understanding of the material and your examination skills and techniques. It is better to clarify early on what you do and do not know and what you can and cannot do, rather than discovering this for the first time in the actual exam. Only by testing yourself and identifying the gaps will you know what to work on.

MANAGING REVISION

It is important to keep in mind at all times that exams are a test of recall, not recognition. All revision and exam preparation should be directed towards practising and testing recall. Many students make the mistake of simply reading through their notes again and again until they feel they 'know' it all. However, what they are really learning is to recognise the material. Learning to recall the information requires a much more active approach.

- Organise or group your material in a meaningful way. This has already been done for you in your unit outline. Use this as a guide to organise the information. This process enables you to begin making connections between information and to focus on sections of related material in turn rather than approaching the work in a haphazard way.
- Be active in your initial reading of the material. Use a method that works for you in connecting and condensing the information – mapping, discussion, drawing ideas, mnemonics etc. Not only is this useful for developing and maintaining your interest but it will also enhance your ability to understand the material and sift out main ideas, theories and arguments. Understanding is one of the keys to remembering and recall.
- Re-read the material, this time concentrating on the main points and central ideas. Condense your summaries even further.
- Cover your notes and recite everything you can remember – this is the test of your ability to recall the material.
- Look at your notes again and check

your recall. Focus on understanding and learning those areas that you did not remember.

- Cover your notes again and jot down or recite what you now remember.
- Continue this process until you have mastered the section of material you are working on.

Additional general hints

- Exam preparation should involve revision of work learned earlier in the year. Try not to leave initial learning until this time.
- Revision is made easier if you have made notes in your own words throughout the year. Your own words are far easier to remember than someone else's and notes prevent you from having to re-read all the original material again.
- Try to approach and study topics from different perspectives. This will help you to cope with questions which look at a topic in a way which is different from how it was presented to you.
- Remain aware of your concentration level at all times. If it starts to slip, take a break and schedule in an alternative study period.

NEED MORE HELP?

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

- 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.

REFERENCES

How to be a successful student, without quitting the human race! J. Dixon, 1988, Penguin Books, Australia.

Preparing for examinations, La Trobe University, Australia.

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