

Revision and Exam Techniques.

An exam is not like gambling; you can fix the odds in your favour. There is no one way of achieving exam success but below are some guidelines.

BEFORE THE EXAM

What standard do I need to achieve?

Exam markers are looking for evidence that you can explain what you have learned and say something about the strength and/or weakness of an argument/point.

Nobody wants you to fail! You do **not** have to give a bibliography and examiners won't expect the same standard as in assignments where you have had several weeks to prepare. However, you could aim to do a condensed version of an assignment, with a beginning, middle and end (conclusion) and back up key points with an example and/or some **short** quotes and/or references such as (Morrison 1995). **BUT, remember to tailor your answer to the question being asked.**

What revision techniques can I use?

First and foremost, you need to **target** your revision. Don't waste time reviewing information that is not likely to be included in your answer. You should **plan your revision time** - draw up a programme/timetable with a priority list but bear in mind that little and often (say two to three hours at a time with little breaks) is better than six hours at a stretch the day before the exam! Build in time for the unexpected. Give yourself up to a week or at least a day per question! Don't forget to **build in breaks and enjoyment.**

Decide as early as you can what topics you are going to cover in the exam. Remember, lecture and tutorial notes/materials are invaluable resources and will give you ideas about what arguments you could present to answer a particular question. Play to your strengths – an assignment on topic X could be used, as you will have done work on this already. But, courses differ. Make sure that you can reprise an essay topic in the exam – some modules don't allow this. **Check the course handbook and with the tutor.**

BUT! Even though you have class notes and your essays, **make your own new notes** – it is surprising how much you learn this way by being **proactive** and putting things in your own words. **Revision is another opportunity to learn. You should NOT passively pore over old notes! Exams are not a test of photographic memory but of what you understand, how you analyse and apply what you have learned.** Your new notes should be brief – they only need trigger your awareness of the topic/question. You could use **revision cards** or **spidergrams!**

ON THE DAY – tips and techniques

Get there early – take an earlier bus/train in case your usual bus/train is delayed. **Nerves are natural.** Most nerves are about the unknown – you already know the exam themes and will have a good idea of what the exam questions will be asking for. If you have organised/prepared yourself in the ways suggested above, this could help steady your nerves or help you harness them to good effect. The adrenaline that comes with nerves can motivate but the trick is not to let nerves overwhelm you. If you panic in the exam, usually at the beginning, stop what you are doing, close your eyes and take deep breaths and focus on relaxing the muscles in neck, shoulders etc one by one.

Many exams require you to answer **two** questions in **two hours**. You should take about five minutes to a **plan** your response and allow about five minutes to check

each answer to each question towards the end of the exam – 10 minutes in total. Your plan can act as a **checklist** to ensure that you **keep to an order and don't stray from the answering the question**. It can be easy to go off at a tangent. You should then be writing for about **45 - 50** minutes to answer each question.

Although the exam question may be asking you to present material and arguments similar to those presented in previous, the actual exam question may be asking you for a slight difference in emphasis! Make sure you **tailor your response to what the question is actually asking**. You can do this especially in the introduction and conclusion to your exam answer or by strategic referring back to the question at a key point/s in your answer. This means you should **read the questions carefully and unpick what the question is asking you to do!** Indeed, **this could be the basis of your introduction**. Stick to the question and do not waffle or twist the question to suit your purpose. Otherwise you could end up doing a really good essay but one which gets marked down because it has answered a different question or strayed away from the question at some point = wasted effort and **marks deducted!**

Checklist: answer only what is asked for.

1. **Don't waste time writing out the question.** It will be written on the exam paper for you. You need only indicate the **question number**.
2. **Consider doing your best question first.** Success breeds confidence and more chances of success.
3. **Plan your response.** Do a **skeleton** or **outline** of your answer that includes a beginning, middle (the most important part) and a conclusion that draws together your argument/main points. A plan will remind you of the running order of your answer and avoid the inclusion of irrelevant material.
4. **A short introduction** (a few lines) can tell the examiner what you will cover – this show that you have understood the question and alerted him/her to how you will answer it and in what order.
5. **Cover your points either in order of importance** or in some kind of **logical sequence**. **Back up your major point/s with ONE example, reference and/or short quote.** Short quotes are easier to remember. Remember that a paragraph usually suffices for each key point. The start of your paragraph introduces the point and the rest of the paragraph builds on it. To make your answer flow, you can use phrases like “In addition” or where you are contrasting a point of view or going on to another subject altogether, you can begin your next major point/paragraph with “However,” “In contrast,” etc. Don't obsess with minor points - **stick to the main ones** – 45 - 50 minutes will whistle by!
6. **If you find that you have left yourself with insufficient time to complete the second question, you could cover the rest of your points in short sentences or bullets so that the examiner at least can see where you were heading – how you would have developed your line of argument/the rest of your answer.** But remember, this is more damage limitation; a strategy of **last resort** and you should **avoid leaving insufficient time** to answer a question.
7. Write as quickly but as **legibly** as you can. The examiner needs to be able to read what you are saying without stopping every other sentence to decode hieroglyphics!

RECAP

1. Be organised. **Failing to prepare = preparing to fail!**
2. Be kind to yourself and accentuate the positive.
3. Accept but try to harness nerves.
4. Read the question **properly and answer** it – a **plan/outline** helps.
5. Answers should have a short introduction, long middle and short conclusion. Major points should be supported by examples, a reference from the literature or possibly a short quote.
6. Five minutes or so unpacking the question and doing a plan/outline of your response, 45 – 50 minutes writing and up to 5 minutes per question checking.
7. Write as quickly but as legibly as you can – try and find that balance between speed and legibility.