



# Exam Techniques

## Student Learning Skills Worksheet 7 / Student Support

January 2008

### 1. Be prepared

Act **now** to enjoy the benefits of less anxiety at exam time.

#### Active Learning

Revise thoroughly. Try to predict what questions will be examined, but not at the expense of extensive revision.

- Look at your unit outlines/ handouts.
- Take note of material likely to be examined.
- Take note in lectures of any mention of material to be examined.
- Locate any previous exams online.
- Prepare brief sample answers in skeleton form.
- Pick a key concept in each line.
- Use a 'memory key' (eg. Acronyms, see Recalling).
- In the month leading up to the exam, learn sample answer lists / memory keys.
- It is essential that you know and understand the course terminology or formulae when answering questions in an exam. Learn the terminology; know how to correctly spell key terms.

#### Advance Planning

As soon as the dates, times and venues are announced start preparing your Examination Timetable. On it you should include:

- When and where your examinations take place.
- Times allocated to domestic activity (eg. eating, sleeping, travelling, chores etc.).
- Time for recreation and physical exercise.
- Study time for when you feel most alert (are you an AM or a PM person?).
- Emergency study time (in case things go awry)

Try to allow adequate amounts of time to each of your subjects and allocate extra time to those you find difficult.

If your exams are scheduled very close together, a sensible strategy is to cover the work for the later exams as soon as possible so that this is "filed away". This will reduce the amount of reviewing required after you sit the first examination.

Try to ensure that your study time will be interruption and distraction free and well-organised with all the materials you need. This will allow you to maximise your study time.

### 2. Revising

How can you "re-learn" so that your knowledge and memory will be reliable in the examination?

#### Systematically review your material

Use "Active" Learning Techniques like SQ3R which stands for...

**Survey** Scan through your notes and texts.

**Question** What is this topic about?

**Read** Try to answer your questions. Take notes.

**Recall** Answer the questions without your notes.

**Review** Re-read your notes whenever you can.

Identify your weak areas early and get assistance if necessary. Understanding is the most vital aid to learning and remembering.

#### Revise material in small chunks

Different subjects have different absorption rates. Don't try to take in too much at one sitting. Break regularly and use this time for "Recite" or "Review". A 15 minute burst with a 5 minute review is often more effective than a one hour slog. Test yourself regularly to ensure that you are remembering.

### 3. Recalling

Develop "keys" to memory. Keys work particularly well in times of stress thus allowing you to unlock the stored information and apply it under exam conditions. Some examples of keys are:

- **Language memory aids**

**Acronym:** A word comprising the first letters of a series of other words, for example 'ROY.G.BIV' represents the spectrum colours Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo, and Violet.

**Mnemonic:** A verse or rhyme to help memory. Another example for spectrum colours is 'Richard Of York Gave Battle In Vain'. Another example of a mnemonic is 'I before E except after C' for remembering a particular spelling.

**Use humour:** For example, to remember the order of the planets, use 'My Very Enormous Mother Jumped Straight Under Nelly's Pantaloon'. NB: Pluto has been relegated, therefore the Pantaloon is outdated!

Summarise your notes to a keyword or phrase which you can recall easily, and devise your own acronyms and mnemonics.

- **Visual memory aids**

Visualise or draw images to associate with the main points. Graphs, tables, coloured highlighting pens, doodles, flow diagrams, mind maps etc are also useful in promoting memory. Draw the main points, say the main points and then write the main points.

- **Motor memory aids**

Try walking, dancing, throwing or kicking a ball while

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repeating the main points out loud, then proceed to write them down.

- **Auditory memory aids**

Record the information you are trying to remember and play it back whenever possible. This allows you to exercise and study simultaneously! Try singing the information you are memorising to the tune of your favourite song.

Beware of interference between similar subjects. Examples include; Physics and Electronics; Psychology and Sociology.

Avoid studying subjects with similar content consecutively, as things can become muddled.

## 4. Practise

- **Practise using your information** as much as possible. Talk to other students about course material. Give lectures to the dog if necessary!
- **Try out old examinations** - use these to simulate "test" conditions (but not to predict questions!).

As the exam day approaches...

- **Don't study excessively the day before the exam.** Do something relaxing. Exercise is good because it makes you physically tired and likely to sleep well.
- **Get a good sleep the night before your exam.** Ensure you get up and out with plenty of time to get to the exam; rushing can be stressful. Think ahead and prepare your materials (eg. calculator, pens etc.) the night before.

## 5. Exam room strategies

Use old exam papers to practice this strategy. Divide the total exam time into the following three sections:

Spend 20% of the time on Planning.  
Spend 70% of the time on Writing.  
Spend 10% of the time on Checking.

As soon as you are told that you can start writing, spend 20% of the total exam time planning your answers to the questions. This particularly applies to essays, short answer, or long numerical problems.

Once you have completed planning each question, begin writing. Keep an eye on your watch and only spend the allocated time answering each question from your plan. Do not panic if you haven't completed the whole question. Your job is to complete the paper.

When you have finished the paper (or used all of your allocated time) then go back and check your answers. If you

know you cannot complete a question properly, refer to your original plan and write the answer in point form. You may gain some marks for your attempt.

The key to this strategy is sticking to it rigidly even if you feel you are having trouble completing questions. If this particular strategy does not suit you, try to develop a strategy of your own. In order to make an exam strategy work, you must practise solving typical exam problems within a time limit so that you become confident in using the approach in a real examination.

## 6. On the day

- **When instructed to write**, jot down all the relevant acronyms and mnemonics on the side of the exam paper where you can refer to them as needed. Don't panic if you can't recall all of them - as you relax into the exam more will come back to you.
- **Use your reading time effectively.** Map out your strategy based on questions you can answer and the marks available. Leave harder questions to last. Allocate time based on the marks available allowing some extra time to go back and proof your answer.
- **Read each question carefully.** Make sure you understand what is expected of you in each question. Answer the question being asked, not the question you would like to answer!
- **For essay questions use your notes to create a brief essay plan.** This will help if you need to make points in note form due to lack of time.
- **Write quickly and neatly.** If time runs short then make points in note form. Use your plan to explain how you would have completed the question if time had not run out. This can often gain you extra marks.
- **If you are asked to calculate answers, show your working.** If you run short of time, show the examiner in point form how you would have solved the calculation. Credit is often possible despite the absence of totally correct computations. You can waste a lot of time going back through computations despite having used the correct method.
- **Leave space at the end of questions in case you wish to add more.** Always start a question on a fresh page. Leave an extra page at the end of questions if you think you would like to add to your answer later on.
- **Stick rigidly to your exam plan.** Do not spend more time writing the answer than you have allocated. Remember, you have allocated sufficient checking time

*Continued over...*

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to enable you to fix up any major problems (and not all questions will require the full allocation of checking time so you will have extra time for the difficult questions).

- **Aim to answer all questions required so you can score better overall.** Unattempted questions will gain you no marks! Do not spend extra time on questions hoping for a perfect score. This is most unlikely if you don't at least attempt all questions.
- **If you have multiple-choice questions, always look for the most correct answer.** Make an intelligent guess (but be sure that there is no penalty for wrong answers).

## What the examiner wants!

- Get to the point and answer the question in a clear and simple manner.
- The more concise your answer the easier it is to mark.
- Keep your handwriting legible otherwise it may be too hard to read which could cost you marks.
- Avoid too much personal opinion, name-dropping and generalisation.
- Demonstrate your knowledge of the subject.
- Use concrete examples as evidence to support your answer.
- Relate all parts of your answer to the original question.
- Do not digress or indulge in long-winded answers that risk putting the marker to sleep!

## Overcoming Test Anxiety

So, you have a test? And you're nervous...Relax, that's normal! Everyone gets nervous sometimes. However, too much stress can affect your performance through poor preparation or confusion and memory loss on the day of the test. Actually a little bit of stress is a great motivator and can help us perform well. So, don't try to avoid stress - control it!

## Dealing with Anxiety

Distinguish between two types of stress:

Type 1: Realistic stress - you haven't prepared well enough - you have every reason to feel nervous. That's normal and rational.

Type 2 Irrational stress - you adequately prepared but still panic and/or overreact, your reaction is NOT rational.

## Changing Your Attitude

Your grade does not reflect your worth. Don't confuse yourself with your results:

- Remind yourself that a test is only a test - you may be able to resit.
- Reward yourself after the test - see a movie, go out for a bite to eat, visit friends.
- Avoid thinking of yourself in a negative way.
- Plan ways to improve your work next term.
- Remember that the most reasonable expectation is to try and demonstrate your understanding of the subject.
- Don't forget the basics. Students preparing for tests often neglect basic biological, emotional, and social needs. To do your best, you must think of yourself as a total person - not just a test taker. Remember to:
- Continue the habits of good nutrition and exercise. Continue your recreational pursuits and social activities - all contribute to your emotional and physical well being.
- Follow a moderate pace when studying; vary your work when possible and take breaks when needed.
- Get plenty of sleep the night before the test - when you are overly tired you will not function at your best.
- Once you feel you are adequately prepared for the test, do some relaxing.