



Examination Techniques



Student Learning Centre
2008

Just before the examination

Stay Healthy

You will get better marks if you are alert during the examination. Make sure you eat well and get enough sleep, exercise and relaxation in the two weeks before your exams. Don't study hard the night before an examination; just review your notes briefly and get a good night's sleep.

Take everything you need – and have it ready the day before

Make sure you have spare pens and pencils, in case they run out or get blunt. Find out whether you are allowed to bring textbooks, notes, dictionaries, maths tables, formulae, calculators or blank paper into the exam. If you need a calculator, ensure that the battery is new enough to last, and if you have to borrow or buy a new one, know how it operates well before you go into the exam. Don't forget your exam slip, if one is required. And do wear a watch. Get a copy of the Lincoln University Guidelines and rules for examinations and familiarise yourself with its contents. (This is available in the Registry)

Check examination dates, times and rooms

Every year, people go to the wrong place, come at the wrong time or, worse, on the wrong day. There is no come back if you do this - you could have wasted a whole semester's work! Put your exam timetable somewhere prominent - on the fridge - and have someone else check it for you (preferably someone who cares that you get to your exams on time!).

Get there in good time

Aim to arrive at the examination room well before the starting time, so you avoid the last minute rush and have time to get settled. If travelling is involved, make sure you leave enough time to cope with emergencies - tyre change, traffic hold-up etc., or have an alternative plan to put in place if necessary.

Relax

Try to relax as much as possible. Remember that it's not a matter of life and death. It's natural to be a little nervous - adrenalin is often an asset and leads to improved performance. But if you think your anxiety level might affect your performance, seek advice from a counsellor eg at Student Health - or get a book on relaxation. Jokes help.

In the examination room

You have a right to be comfortable

If there is sun in your eyes, or not enough light, if you are too hot or too cold, if the room is stuffy or there is noise from outside, tell the supervisor. Maybe you could change your seat. Do speak up - it could cost you marks if you are distracted by poor conditions.

Check the time

Ask which clock will be used to time the examination, and check your watch against it.

Get ready

Lay out everything you need on your table. If you are sitting an open book examination, make sure your resources are organised and arranged in a way that you can easily access the information without wasting time and without disturbing those around you.

Read the instructions

Usually you will get time to read the instructions before the examination starts. Make sure you understand:

- how many questions you have to answer, and how many from each section
- which questions are compulsory
- how many marks each question is worth
- what kind of questions they are - essay, short answer or multiple choice
- how you should show your answers (this is especially important if computer-scored answer sheets are being used)
- how you should head up the answer sheets and where to write your code number
- whether you need to start each essay on a new page
- whether you need to leave a margin

Make a schedule

It is important to plan your time carefully in an examination, so you don't spend too long on one question and then run out of time at the end.

A good rule of thumb for a three hour examination is to spend 5 - 15 minutes for brainstorming at the beginning and leave 20 - 30 minutes at the end for checking and to allocate the rest of the time according to how many marks each question is worth. Note down the times when you need to begin each new section or question.

For example, if there are five 20-mark questions to be answered in three hours, spend no more than 30 minutes on each question ($30 \times 5 < 150$ minutes), and the remaining 30+ minutes on planning and checking.

...and stick to it

Place you schedule where you can see it and stick to the times, even if you have to leave some questions unfinished. You will get far more marks if you attempt all questions, rather than spending a long time on some and missing others altogether. Leave enough space, so that if you have time at the end, you can complete unfinished answers.

Answering the Questions

Answer the easy questions first

Skim through the paper quickly, marking the questions that look the easiest. Answer these first, and come back to the others later. This will give you confidence.

- Start with an overview of the paper - you can do this in the reading time
- Identify those questions you can answer, or would prefer to attempt and get started as quickly as possible.
- Eliminate the questions you **can't** answer or would prefer to avoid - once you have eliminated questions, you have less material to deal with.
- Analyse the questions quickly; make decisions or choices about how you will approach the answer; stick to the topics you have revised - don't try something new.
- Leave room for making changes as you go along.

Making choices

- The easiest strategy is to start with your favourite topic
 - * this will give you a sense of confidence, get rid of the butterflies and promote your fluency
 - * you will also gain marks more easily
 - * your sub-conscious will have time to work on the areas you think you don't know
- However, you **might** start with a more difficult question, and save your favourite as a "reward" for later –advantage: you are tackling the more difficult question in a fresher state
- Remember that you might have other ideas about one topic while you are writing about another. Make sure you note these down when you think of them.

Underway

- Write as much as possible on each question, but keep an eye on the time allocated for each question
- If you finish a question early, either try to think of any points you have missed, or go on to the next question
- If you go on to the next, leave blank space on the page for possible later thoughts.
- Firm and concise answers are better than those which wander aimlessly just to fill up the page
- Label sketches and diagrams and spell technical terms correctly.

General

- Write as clearly as possible. Examiners are human, and marking is an onerous task; you can assist your cause by making answers easy to read - remember that trying to read untidy work is irritating. Some people prefer to write on every second line to make their answer more legible and to leave room for corrections later.
- It is easier to score the first half of the marks for any question than it is to score the second half.
- A firm structure will help to clarify your arguments
- If you finish the paper early, use time to check and edit your work.

Check your answers

- Spend at least the last few moments glancing over what you have written
- Check for possible mistakes of fact, grammar and punctuation
- Correct mistakes as neatly as possible. Do not scribble.
- Write any additions on the left-hand page, and show insertions clearly.
- If you have run out of time to complete an answer, add the rest of your points in note form.

Examination Techniques

Answering the Questions

A marking schedule will have already been drawn up for the exam before you sit it, so this means that your lecturers and examiners will have already agreed upon the main points they will be looking for in the answer to each question. Marks will, therefore, be allocated accordingly - marking is not a hit and miss affair, nor is the composing of the questions. The aim is to give credit where credit is due. You should bear this in mind as you plan your answers.

Essay Questions:

Good examination essays have all the features of good writing. The difference is that writing examination essays is a 'bare bones' version of the normal writing process.

Some hints:

- ***Read the question.***

Some people walk into the examination room and the first thing they do is write. 'READ EVERY WORD IN THE QUESTION' in big letters on the exam paper.

- ***Read and Analyse***

1. Read the whole paper carefully and choose your questions.
2. Interpret each question carefully. Make sure you answer the question - don't try to fit a prepared or rote essay answer into a question it does not fit.
 - Identify the instruction, topic and focus
 - Clarify the meanings of key words
 - Rephrase the question - put it into your own words.

- ***Brainstorm Ideas***

1. Ask yourself a series of questions which you can answer in your essay.
2. Write key words which will act as triggers for more detailed information.
3. Brainstorm for all the questions at the start of the exam, or brainstorm for the first question but leave a space for the other questions on your planning sheet so that so you can jot down ideas for questions still to be answered as they occur to you during the exam.

- ***Organise the Ideas***

1. Check that your ideas are relevant to the question.
2. Organise your key words into a logical structure; number points rather than rewriting.

- **Write**

Remember that markers are looking for **key points clearly expressed** and presented in a **logically structured** essay.

Introduction

1. Get straight to the point
2. Rephrase the question or repeat key terms from the question.
3. Include an outline of the main points you will cover

Body

1. Write in paragraphs, using your key words as prompts. Use clear simple paragraph structure: one main idea per paragraph, clear topic sentence, series of logically ordered points.
2. Provide evidence or detail for each main point. Use illustrations or examples whenever possible. Refer to well-known “names” in the field.
3. Use transition words to give your writing structure (*the next..., another ..., however ..*)
4. Write on every second line and leave several lines blank at the end of each paragraph; this makes it easier to add points later.
5. Write in whole sentences rather than note form. If you start to run out of time, however, write a skeleton answer and then go on to the next question.

Conclusion

1. Use the conclusion to draw together the points you have made and to make a good final impression. This is a good place to put your own opinion.
2. Link the conclusion back to the question and the introduction by echoing key terms.

- **Check**

Leave yourself time at the end to check for

1. clarity of expression
2. legibility
3. spelling
4. punctuation

Short answer questions:

Some examinations require answers that are only a sentence or paragraph in length.

Some hints:

- Read the question (underline the key words and number the tasks).
- Rephrase the question in the beginning of your answer.
- Have a main idea and supporting details.
- Read your answer, checking it for sense, for ways you could improve it, and for errors that need fixing.

Objective questions: multiple choice, true or false

Multi - choice questions can be demanding, requiring careful thought and reasoning about what you know - application of knowledge as well as specific knowledge. Often, subtle differences between the choices will be testing your real understanding. They can go beyond the mere testing of facts or an instant answer. You must revise for them, rather than hopefully being able to recognise the correct answer. Don't leave it to general knowledge or chance.

Basic Instructions:

- Allocate your time accurately before you begin.
- Make sure you know the method of answering the questions - does the exam paper tell you to tick the box or circle the letter or shade in a space. Note the way in which you are told to make corrections if you decide you have chosen the wrong option.
- Answer easy questions first. Don't be afraid to leave questions and move on.
- Read the question carefully. In particular note any negative: for example "Which of these is *not*"; "All of these *except* ."
It is easy to overlook the negative aspect. Note whether you are expected to choose the **best** or the **only true** or **correct** one.
- It is sometimes better to decide what your answer would be **before** you look at the options, and then make your choice of the one that matches your response. You can be put off and confused by other suggestions that the examiner might throw up as alternatives. This is especially pertinent for answering computational questions.
- Read all the optional answers, even if you think the first one is correct. There is often an answer that looks right, followed by one that is right. Often a single word makes all the difference. Also, one of the options – generally the last – may be “All/none of the above.”
- Answer all questions, even if you have to guess an answer - unless *the instructions say that marks will be taken off for incorrect answers*. If you don't know an answer, come back to it when you have answered all the other questions. If you still cannot work it out, eliminate options you think are probably incorrect, and then guess.

If you miss out any questions - to be answered later when you have thought about them - note down, highlight or circle the question number to remind you - you don't want to forget to go back and fill in any unanswered questions.

Further strategies:

- Knowledge or understanding is best. Use this wherever possible.
- Elimination is a second tier strategy. It narrows the possibilities. Cross out those options you know are incorrect and then use knowledge and/or guessing to make your choice.
- Guessing is the third tier strategy. Once you have guessed, do not change your answer unless you can apply **sound** reasoning/logic/knowledge to the problem. Your intuitive response is often the best.

Hints for answering mathematical questions

Mathematical subjects require different strategies ;it is really the process that is being examined. Examiners are often frustrated that they have nothing to mark -that is, an incorrect answer supported by no working. Since several marks may be allocated for the process, an incorrect answer may in fact lose only a half or one mark, if the process used is actually correct. This practice also helps the student to develop a better understanding of the processes and should be practised all the time - not just produced for examinations!

- Write down any formulae you may need, as soon as you can.
- If you cannot immediately see how to do a problem, leave it (noted) and return to it later.
- Label all working stages clearly, so the examiner can easily follow them
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- Write something in answer to every problem. You may get a mark for writing part of the correct formula, and all marks are worth having.

What the examiners want:

Answer the question

- the examiner wants you to answer the question in a clear and simple manner
- a plain, direct answer with no frills is easier to mark than one which is ornate and flowery
- getting straight to the point creates a favourable impression
- the more concise your answer, the easier it is to mark

Misconceptions

- there isn't some magical key to unlock the secret of exam success
- you don't have to 'please' the examiner - except by answering the question
- there isn't a 'knack' to exam success - it is a combination of hard work, preparation and *clear thinking*

Examiners are human too

- marking scripts is a very boring task
- judging grades is a subjective and difficult matter
- yes - some exam questions are occasionally difficult to understand
- but that means they are hard for everybody

What examiners don't want:

- untidy work which is difficult to read
- longwinded answers which drift on and off the subject
- answers which have been written to ‘impress’, filled with lots of ill-digested jargon.
- too much personal opinion, name-dropping and generalisation

How to gain extra credit

- get straight to the point
- keep to the subject - no digressions, waffling or ‘packing’.
- relate all parts of your answer to the original question
- show evidence of your knowledge of the subject
- wherever possible, give concrete examples as evidence

N.B.

Massey University OWLL (online writing and learning link) and Auckland University Centre for Academic Development both contain useful material about exam techniques.