Exam: Strategies

Preparing for online or in-person exams

It's normal to feel nervous about exams. Consistent study throughout the semester is the best way to reduce exam stress and build confidence. Regular engagement with lectures, readings, and assessment tasks helps make exam preparation more manageable.

Plan your study

Once exam dates are available, create a realistic study schedule that includes:

- Study sessions for each subject
- Time for sleep, meals, exercise, work, and other commitments
- Extra revision time for challenging topics
- Regular breaks and contingency time for unexpected disruptions

Choose a study environment that is organised, comfortable, and free from distractions. Having all the materials you need readily available will help you stay focused and use your time efficiently.

Revise actively

Focus on understanding key concepts rather than memorising isolated facts. Useful revision strategies include:

- Reviewing unit outlines, lecture notes, and study materials
- Identifying key themes, concepts, and terminology
- Completing practice questions and past exams where available
- Creating summary notes, concept maps, or flashcards
- Testing yourself regularly to strengthen recall

One effective approach is the **SQ3R** method:

- **Survey**: Scan your notes, readings, and study materials.
- **Question**: Ask yourself, what is the topic about?
- **Read**: Read actively to find answers to your questions.
- **Recall**: Test yourself by answering questions without your notes.
- **Review**: Revisit and consolidate your learning regularly.

Improve your memory and recall

Use memory aids to help retain and retrieve information during exams. Different techniques work for different learners, so experiment with a range of strategies:

- **Acronyms and mnemonics** to simplify and remember key information.
- **Keywords and summaries** that reduce complex ideas to a few memorable prompts.
- **Mind maps, diagrams, flowcharts, and other visual aids** to show connections between concepts.
- **Reading information aloud, creating audio recordings, or discussing concepts with others** to reinforce learning through listening and speaking.
- **Combining movement with study**, such as walking, stretching, or repeating information aloud while reviewing notes, to strengthen recall.

Using a combination of visual, auditory, verbal, and active learning strategies can make information easier to remember and retrieve under exam conditions. When planning revision sessions, alternate between different subjects where possible to avoid confusion between similar topics.

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During the exam

- Use your reading time strategically. Review the entire exam, identify the questions you can answer confidently, and allocate your time according to the marks available. Having a clear plan can help you stay focused and avoid spending too much time on any one question.
- Read each question carefully and make sure you understand exactly what is being asked before you begin writing.
- Start with questions you feel most confident answering. This can help build momentum and confidence, while ensuring you secure marks early. Return to more challenging questions once you have completed the easier ones.
- For extended responses, spend a few minutes planning before you write. A brief outline of your main points can help you organise your ideas, stay focused on the question, and structure your answer logically.
- Show your working for calculations and provide point-form answers if time is running out. You may receive credit for your method even if the final answer is incorrect.
- Stick to your time plan and avoid spending too long perfecting a single answer.

What examiners look for

Examiners award marks for answers that clearly demonstrate your understanding of the subject. To maximise your marks:

- Directly address the question.
- Are clear, concise, and well organised.
- Demonstrate understanding of relevant concepts and terminology.
- Use appropriate examples or evidence where required.
- Remain focused on the topic without unnecessary information.

Avoid unsupported claims, irrelevant details, and personal opinions unless required.

Managing exam stress

Feeling nervous before or during an exam is completely normal. In fact, a manageable level of stress can help you stay focused and motivated. The goal is not to eliminate stress entirely, but to manage it in a way that supports your performance and wellbeing.

- Acknowledge your feelings.
- Take slow, deep breaths if you feel overwhelmed.
- Use positive self-talk and focus on doing your best. Remind yourself, *"I've prepared for this"* or *"I can do this"*.
- Remember that an exam measures your performance on a specific task, *not* your worth as a person.
- Maintain healthy habits such as adequate sleep, regular breaks, exercise, and good nutrition during the exam period.
- When the exam is over, take time to relax and acknowledge the effort you have put into your studies.

Related helpsheets

- Exams: Managing Anxiety
- Exams: Problem Solving
- Time-Management

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