

Examination Strategies

Be prepared: Act now to enjoy the benefits of less anxiety at exam time

Many students express concern at the thought of sitting examinations. Remember that the study you do during semester will contribute to the knowledge that will be tested. Build on it as you go, starting at the very beginning of semester. This will help to reduce the stress of exam period.

Advance planning

As soon as the dates, times and venues are announced, start preparing an exam timetable. Include:

- When and where your exam will take place
- Times for domestic activity (e.g., sleeping, travelling, chores etc.)
- Time for recreation and physical exercise
- Study time for when you feel most alert (are you a morning or afternoon person?)
- Emergency study time (in case things go awry)

Try to set adequate amounts of time for each of your subjects, and allocate extra time for those you find difficult. If your exams are scheduled 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.

To maximise your study time, try to ensure that your study time is free from interruptions and distractions. Ensure your space is well-organised with all the materials you need.

Active learning

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

- Look at your course 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' (e.g., 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 and know how to correctly spell key terms.

Revising

You want your knowledge and memory to be reliable in the examination. Get assistance early with any weak areas you identify. Understanding and active revision are vital to learning and remembering.

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.

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 five minute review is often more effective than a one-hour session. Test yourself regularly to ensure that you are remembering.

Recalling

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

Language memory aids

Acronyms: 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' to remember a particular spelling.

Humour: For example, to remember the order of the planets, use 'My Mother Jumped Straight Under Nelly's Very Enormous 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 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.

Practise & rest

- Practise using the exam information: Talk to others about your course material. Lecture your dog!
- Try out old examinations: Use these to simulate exam conditions, but not to predict questions.
- Don't study excessively the day before the exam. Do something relaxing, or exercise to change focus.
- Get a good sleep the night before your exam. Ensure you give yourself ample time to get to the exam; rushing can be stressful. Think ahead and prepare your materials (e.g., calculator, pens etc.).

Exam room strategy

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

- 20% of the time on Planning
- 70% of the time on Writing
- 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. This particularly applies to essays, short answer, or long numerical problems.

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

When you have used all of your allocated time, 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, 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. 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.

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 and stick to the plan. Allow time to check your answers.
- 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.
- 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 may add to your answer later on.
- Stick to your exam plan. Do not spend more time writing the answer than you have allocated.
- Remember, you have allocated sufficient checking time to enable you to fix any major problems. 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. Questions with no attempt will gain you no marks. Do not spend extra time on questions hoping for a perfect score. Attempt ALL questions.
- If you have multiple-choice questions, always look for the most correct answer.

What the examiner wants

- Answers that are clear and simple
- Concise answers (they are easier to mark)
- Legible handwriting (text that is hard to read could cost you marks)
- A demonstration of your knowledge of the subject
- Concrete examples as evidence to support your answer
- All parts of your answer are related to the original question
- NO personal opinion, name-dropping and generalisations in your answers

Recognise anxiety

- Acknowledging you may be worried is a positive step: It is normal to feel this way in exams.
- Stress can be a motivator and can help you perform well.
- Think positively and support yourself through the exam with affirming thoughts (“I can do this”).
- If you are worried, control your breathing by taking long deep breaths.
- Do the best you can.
- Refer to other FedUni helpsheets below about managing exam anxiety.

Realistic stress

- If you have not prepared well, then you have every reason to feel nervous; that’s normal and rational. Accept that your results, on this occasion, may not be good.
- Remember that your grade does not reflect your worth. Don't confuse yourself with your results.
- Use the experience to motivate you to prepare more thoroughly in the future.

Consider your attitude

- Study at a moderate pace; vary your work when possible and take breaks when needed.
- Don't neglect your basic biological and emotional needs while you are revising for exams.
- Continue the habits of good nutrition and exercise, recreation and social activities; they contribute to your emotional and physical well-being.
- Remember you are a whole person, not just a test taker.
- The most reasonable expectation is to demonstrate your understanding of the subject.
- Reward yourself after the test - see a movie, go out for dinner, visit friends.
- Plan ways to improve your work next term.

Other helpsheets available

- Exams: Multiple Choice Questions
- Exams: Managing Anxiety
- Short Answer Questions
- Time Management
- Weekly Planner
- Five-step Planner