

Final Exams: "The horror, the horror!"

(Need help developing a study schedule or writing those final papers? Call the writing and study skills program - 453-4646. We exist to help you!)

"April is the cruelest month." For those students who have not yet experienced end-of-the-year exams, this is the proverbial calm before the storm; a time when the innocent are easily lulled by spring sunshine into a sense of false security.

Contrary to popular opinion, however, the practice of administering finals in not necessarily evidence of professorial perversity.

Believe it or not, it is not always better to give than to receive; professors and their busy assistants suffer as much as much do in the process.

"How much study time is sufficient?"

While there are numerous things students can do to ensure a better performance on exams, a critical predictor of performance is frequently the way students budget their time—both in preparing for and in the actual writing of exams. Students who have been attending classes regularly, taking effective notes, and completing assigned reading all along will be happy to learn that the best time to start preparing for the final exam is in the first class.

Having consistent study habits throughout the term enhances comprehension and retention since information is taken in and understood in manageable bites. Those precious days between the end of classes and the final exam can be judiciously devoted to review of material which has already been mastered: this is not the time for learning and/or attempting to assimilate new information, or for frittering away irreplaceable amounts of time completing long overdue papers, or piecing together last minute class projects or group reports that were assigned at the beginning of the term. For some, however, this is a reality.

It is also useful to adopt a chequebook mentality with regard to the expenditure of time—especially between now and April 30th. This means figuring out exactly how much time you have available and determining how much work you have left to do. Check your course outline. If, like most mortals, you find yourself in a deficit position where the work left exceeds the time available by ridiculously large amounts, it will be necessary to begin prioritizing tasks and completing as much work as possible in the days ahead.

"But I'm allergic to exams...."

Exam anxiety is a common affliction among students and while a certain amount of it is healthy and completely natural, it can occasionally paralyze. If you know you are prone to extreme exam anxiety (to the point where exam stress is inhibiting your performance on the exam), help is available through Counselling Services. Individual counselling is available and workshops on this and related topics are offered throughout the year.

Of course, the best wagon against exam anxiety is the confidence that comes with being well-prepared. Find out as much as possible about the exam in advance, including how long it is expected to take to complete. Be sure you know what format the exam will take, i.e., are you facing a multiple choice, essay, short answer exam, or perhaps a combination?

"How do I study for what lies ahead?"

The strategies necessary to study for a multiple choice exam are different from those required in preparing to write a three

hour final which consists entirely of essays. In a multiple choice exam, it is frequently necessary to know a little about a lot; an essay format requires a lot of knowledge about a little, i.e., essays usually address a single (if complex) question. And don't be fooled: open book exams sound easier than they are (if you don't already know it, you are not likely to find it in the middle of an exam—furthermore, searching takes time). Similarly, take-home exams can end up taking a whole lot longer than 3 hours and professional expectations are necessarily higher.

"Where to start...?"

Making summary sheets which integrate your lecture notes and assigned reading is an exceptionally efficient way of studying material for exams. By summarizing and integrating material learned in and out of the classroom, students reduce the volume of information to be recalled; the information is studied in an organized way that, when combined with repetition, also aids in comprehension of concepts and enables retention.

When devising a study strategy, ask yourself the following: What's in this chapter?

How does the content of this chapter relate to what has been covered in class? What does this chapter have to do with the one before? The one following? Where does this chapter fit into the field? Does

the content of this chapter differ from or supplement what I have heard in lecture, discussed in tutorial, or observed in the lab? How does the Table of Contents in my textbook compare with the topics listed on my course outline? Are topics covered in the text which are not included in the course outline; or listed in the course outline but go unmentioned in the text? Is this important?

Thinking like a professor and predicting possible questions is another means of pre-

paring for exams. After completing a full review of course material and lecture notes, put yourself on the other side of the lectern for a moment. If you were a professor. What kinds of questions would you be likely to ask? You couldn't ask only difficult questions; a class of 160 "Fs" might be a bit hard to slide past the Dean—ditto for exams with questions no harder than "what is your name?" Instead, try to think of questions with varying levels of difficulty and complexity. Score yourself on your responses. Try again, and practice until you begin to improve. And remember: Questions from

lectures or assigned reading or other course activities are all fair game.

Along with constructing your own practising exams, take full advantage of exams from previous years which are often kept on file in campus libraries. Don't just xerox

them and scan the questions; take time to complete the exam and check your score before studying to help identify weak areas.

"A few exam strategies..."

Regardless of the format, here are some general strategies for writing exams that may prove helpful. Try not to study the night before an exam. Go to a movie, keep yourself quiet, surround yourself with calm people. Bear in mind that adequate rest and proper nutrition are essential to concentration.

Know the location where the exam is to be written well in advance. Arrive early so as to select a spot where you will be comfortable. Choose a spot from which you can see the blackboard and clock and hear instructions clearly.

Listen carefully to all instructions issued prior to writing and make sure to read the directions carefully. Before launching into answering questions, read through the entire exam and decide how you will allocate your time; the number of marks for each question will help to determine how much time should be spent on each section. Never spend an inordinate amount of time working on a section worth 5% at the expense of an essay question worth 40%. Leave yourself a cushion of time at the end of the exam in order to check answers or add to what you have already written.

When completing multiple choice exams look for questions for which you are certain of the answers; leave the questions on which you are blank until the end. Watch out for tricks of wording; the use of negative words and prefixes can create confusion. Try circling all negative words and prefixes in a confusing statement.

Watch out for qualifying words or phrases (such as all, most, some, or none) as they can drastically alter the meaning of a statement. For example, the statement "all birds fly" might at first appear true until you stop to think of emus, ostriches and other flightless birds.

"What if I don't know and just have to guess?"

-The option "all of the above" is frequently correct. Check this assumption by

determining whether more than one of the remaining choices is possible.

- The longest response containing the most detail is often the correct answer.

- When faced with a choice of numbers and unable to eliminate any of the responses by reason alone, select middle numbers.

- If look-alike options are presented, choose between them if you have no idea of the correct response.

- Before guessing at an answer, take the time to skim through the responses to other questions. Think of your exam as also being a reference document; it is impossible to ask questions without also revealing answers in the process. (Responses to multiple choice sections may also provide grist for the short answer or essay portion of the exam).

When writing essays, make sure to read the directions carefully and take note of the number of questions to be answered. Budget your time carefully and stick to your time plan. Read all the questions several times and pay close attention to the verbs used in the instructions; be sure to answer the question asked and not veer off on a tangent. You may write a stunning essay but if you haven't answered the question, you won't get the marks.

Assume that the marker is unfamiliar with the subject and provide a complete explanation. Remember, this is your chance to show your professor everything you know about a given topic. Don't leave things unsaid.

Construct outlines or diagrams to aid your reasoning and to help you develop a logical sequence to the ideas you wish to present; raid other parts of the exam for supporting facts and/or ideas. Begin with the easiest essay questions first and use this opportunity as a warm-up.

Avoid unsupported opinions wherever possible; if you are a specific fact, date, or statistic, make certain it is correct. Use natural language and aim to be as concise as possible. Your response will be much more impressive if it is straightforward and clear rather than muddled and rambling.

Legibility and the use of proper grammar, spelling and punctuation also count.

Begin your essay with a tight introduction and end with a strong position; your conclusion is not the place to run out of gas.

Lastly, take heart in the realization that : a) no one has ever died from writing exams, and b) the only thing standing between you and the beach is a piece of paper.

Good luck. If you need further help, please contact us at 453-4646.

Writing and study skills program
Dept. of Extension and Summer Session

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All the best with the exams kids!