

# WRITING EXAMS EFFECTIVELY

# EXAM BL

Features Editor: Ryna Brideau

Now you're in the exam room. The time has come. Don't panic. You know the material. All you have to do is get it down on the exam paper in the right places and all is well. The first thing to do when you receive an exam is read the introductory material. It may contain instructions that are priceless before you start writing down answers but worthless afterwards, such as "Answer eight out of ten questions," "All questions are of equal value," or "Students in Section A answer question 1 and 2. Students in Section B answer questions 1 and 3".

Many students do badly on exams because they don't read the questions properly. Now this may seem like a minor problem, but it isn't. You are reading the question under tense conditions which can cause you to read things into the question. Many students pick up key words in the question and begin to write furiously without really understanding what is being asked. Read the first question. Read it carefully, picking out the key words and phrases. Try to understand exactly what the instructor is asking.

A good teacher will not set an exam in which all questions can be answered without thought. A student who suffers from verbal diarrhea will never be an A student and, if the professor is critical, may even fail the exam question. I always make a simple analogy to my students to illustrate the situation. If the exam question said simply, "What time is it?" You would not describe the brand of the watch from which you were telling the time. You would not say that it had a gold, leather or plastic strap. You would say, "It is six o'clock" or whatever time it was. If it was six o'clock, your teacher would give you perfect marks. If you said the big hand is on twelve and the little hand is on six, you would get some marks for being correct, if not knowledgeable. On the other hand, if you said, "It's a Times," you would not pass the question.

So read the first question. Then underline the important words and phrases. Then read the next question and continue until you have read the whole exam. After you have finished these preliminaries, determine how long you should spend on each question, taking into consideration the mark value of each. This simple math is very critical. If the exam is worth one hundred marks and you have fifty minutes to write it, you would not want to spend twenty-five minutes on a twenty-mark question. Balance your time with the mark value of each question.

For example, if the exam is fifty minutes long and worth one hundred marks, you should spend about one minute for every two marks. Or you should spend about ten minutes on a twenty-mark question. If there is plenty of time such calculations will not be necessary, but on time-limited exams it is always worth doing them so that you don't spend too much time on one question at the expense of another. In an exam in one of my second-year courses, one student revealed exactly how not paying attention to the time factor could be harmful. On this exam the student obtained a grade of 68%. He was upset because he received zero out of twenty-five on the last question. He was so rushed he didn't read the question properly and had written an improper answer. To use my analogy, he had described the watch and not the time. If he had been more careful and truly did know the answer to the last question, his grade would have been over 90% rather than 68%.

When you begin to write, answer the easiest questions first. You should find that as you work you will remember important points about the other questions. Make a note of these on the margins of the respective questions as you complete the present one. Then when you begin the other questions you will have a base on which to work. No matter how much it is emphasized, students often fail to appreciate the necessity of organizing their thoughts. This is especially important on major exams which allow time to do so. An organized, well-thought-out answer can make up for severe deficiencies in knowledge, just as poor organization that could move you from a C grade to a B or even an A.

Another major error that students make on exams is to contradict themselves. If you are hazy on a topic, it is wiser to avoid it. Or, if that is impossible, take a stand; support one point of view or one idea. Not all areas are cut and dried - in fact, few seem to be at university - but this is not what we are discussing. We are discussing the problem of calling a cat black on one line and then calling the same animal white a little while later. Now the instructor can clearly see that you do not really know what color the cat is. If this is important, then no marks will be given for this part of the question. Many high school teachers have had stopped students from this practice and reinforce the students' bad - or sneaky - habit of putting two different answers down in the hope of partial marks. Sometimes you may get away with this at university, but only if you have proved yourself to be solid on other aspects of your exam.

When you contradict yourself on an exam, the marker loses confidence in you. If you make any questionable comments he or she will likely assume that you don't know what you're talking about. Remember, the person who grades your exam has nothing to go on but your responses on the exam booklet. If they are inaccurate or inconsistent, then you cannot hope to get a decent mark. Avoid contradicting yourself.

Some other considerations when you are writing an exam are:

- Can diagrams be used? If they can, be sure they are clearly drawn and labelled. If you are good at drawing, you can exploit this talent on your tests.

- Can some of the points be listed or placed in a table to save space and time?

- Can material from other courses be used - but sparingly - to support your answer?

- Have you drawn your answer from more than a small portion of the course to show that you understand the question in terms of the total course content?

- Be attuned to what is important to your instructor: Know when to give the instructor's opinion and when to give other points of view. (To put all points of view into their proper perspective is a talent that will take years to develop!)

Professor Danton H. O'Day



About the author:

Professor Danton H. O'Day lectures on the University of Toronto's Erindale Campus where he is one of the college's top teachers. This excerpted from his successful student guide *Succeed at University* (2nd Edition, Canadian Press, Toronto, 1990).