



COPING WITH EXAMINATIONS – EXAMINATION TECHNIQUE

Even when students have studied a course thoroughly, they can fail to do themselves justice in the examination through:

- inadequate/inefficient revision
- poor exam technique

Remember that revision and examination techniques are skills that can be learned about and practised.

The subject of revision technique is dealt with in another handout. Those notes focus on coping in the examination itself. (Of course the two topics are closely related!)

The Format of the Examination

It's important to familiarise yourself with this by studying specimen papers/past papers.

Some Common Mistakes in Examinations

It can also be very helpful to think about *things that students do wrong* in examinations, which adversely affect their performance. Knowing the pitfalls can help you to avoid them!

The following are based on Examiner's Reports:

- failure to follow basic examination instructions eg. about the number of questions to answer from each section of the paper
- misallocation of time – at worst resulting in insufficient questions being answered eg. 3 instead of 4, throwing away 25% of marks
- failure to answer the question set, misreading or misinterpreting the question; writing 'All I know about ...'. Cases have been noted of students coming in with prepared answers or quoting TMAs word for word without any attempt to adapt them to the specific question set
- basing answers largely on 'common sense' rather than on the course material
- failure to illustrate and support arguments sufficiently eg. with reference to specific theories, authorities, case studies etc.

- poorly presented answers eg. lack of planning leading to weakly structured, disorganised answers; lack of conclusions so answers 'peter out' and so on. (Such problems have even been noted among student with a good understanding of the course material – so be warned!)
- writing illegibly.

Awareness of problems like these suggests things that you can do to make the most of your examination:

Examination Strategies

Read Examination instructions carefully

How many questions are to be answered? How many from each section? How long does this allow per question? etc. (eg. 3 hour paper, 4 questions to be answered, each carrying equal weight; 3 questions from Part 1 and one from Part II; approx 45 mins. per question).

Read through the paper and choose questions carefully

Allow 5–10 min. for this. Focus on questions relating to blocks/themes which you concentrated on in revision.

Order of questions

It does not usually matter what order you take the questions in – just number them carefully. Do them in the order that you feel happiest with (for example, some students like to start with their 'second best' – this can build up confidence, without so much danger or over-running on time).

Spend time thinking about and planning each question

Do this before you start writing it up (eg. 5–10 minutes per question, leaving 30–35 mins for writing up). Don't be panicked by the 'scribblers'.

- **Read questions carefully**, underline key words etc. Notice if there are different parts to cover. Don't be sidetracked by similar questions you have tackled in the past eg. in TMAs. Remember the aim is to answer the specific question set, not just to air knowledge.

Continued over

Revision and Examinations

- **'Brainstorm'** – jot down relevant ideas as they come to you, in the answer book. Thinking about the questions should already have started to 'home you in' on relevant course material eg. particular unit or part of unit. Note down main themes and arguments, ideas and concepts plus authorities, illustrations and examples; often just a word or phrase is enough to capture a point – pattern/spray notes can be useful here. Do not censor ideas or the flow may dry up, you can strike out anything irrelevant afterwards, if the flow gets stuck write something silly like 'fish and chips'. Sometimes thinking about the TV programmes can jog your memory. If you're aware of any material that should be included but you just can't call it to mind, then 'send a message to your brain' and leave it (remember how many names etc. often come back to you when you stop trying to remember them).

NB Where a question is block related, material from that block should be to the fore but you can still cross refer to other parts of the course or to summer school material where relevant. Indeed examiners praise those who recognise interconnections in the course and can use material across the course to illustrate themes and issues.

- **Sort out** the jotted points into a sensible sequence. Just put a number by each point to indicate the order you decide on. Cross out anything that doesn't look relevant; remember that exam answers should have an introduction, main body and conclusion just like TMAs.

Some final points on planning

- Examiners' reports praise evidence of planning – it leads to better structured answers.
- Jot plans in the answer book and mark them off neatly afterwards to indicate rough work, but make sure examiner can still see them – examiners warm to signs of planning!
- Some students like to plan all the answers first, while really fresh. Others prefer to take each in turn – do what suits *you* best.

Writing up answers – some points

- There's no need to write out questions (unless it *helps* you to focus) as it can waste valuable time, but keep referring back to the question in your answer to keep you on course and show that you are addressing it.
- Do not forget introductions and conclusions. Use introductions to indicate clearly how you intend to tackle the question. If the question is at all ambiguous, state how you have interpreted it. Do not let your argument 'peter out', but draw it together clearly in a conclusion.
- Remember, the examiner does not know you, so cannot assume you know something that is not there. So do not be afraid to 'state the obvious'. Express yourself as clearly as you can.

- If you suddenly remember an important point, write it in a box with an arrow or asterisk to show where it *should* have gone – so you don't spoil the flow.

- Try to write legibly.

NB By adopting a stage-by-stage approach like this, you are not asking your mind to do too much at once. This makes for better answers. With piles of scripts to mark the examiner will warm to **your** relevant, well organised, clearly presented and legible answers!

Timing – remember to stick to timing as rigidly as you can:

- Remember how much time you have per question. Keep a careful eye on the time. When you are coming towards the end of the time allotted to a question, try to round it off and then move on to the next. Resist the temptation to over-run.
- If the worst comes to the worst and you do run short of time for the last question, put something down. A plan in note form is unlikely to scrape a pass. Probably better is to start the answer and finish with an indication of where it was leading ie. '*Had I had time I would have ...*' **Best of all is not to get into this situation, so learn to budget your time carefully.**

A few practical hints – the following will help to avoid unnecessary worry or problems:

- Get well organised beforehand eg. check carefully when and where you have to go; make sure you have a spare pen; wear suitable clothes, you don't want to be too hot or cold in an exam.
- Take along anything (within reason) that will comfort you – sweets, a flask of coffee, a good luck charm, a photo, for instance of your family or your tutor, to calm or inspire you.
- Get to the exam in good time – you don't want anything to fluster you.
- If you are early avoid talking to others – it can be depressing.
- Once in the exam room, find your place, settle in, get your equipment organised, unwrap sweets etc. Do not let others disturb you.
- If you feel upset then write down on the paper how you feel – it can release tension.
- Afterwards avoid post mortems. Let a decent interval elapse and only then think back and try to learn from the experience.

One Last Comment – the strategies outlined in this handout are not intended as hard and fast rules but simply as initial guidelines that you may find useful. Examination technique, like revision technique, is a very personal thing, and what works for one person can be unhelpful for another. It is important to learn through experience what works for *you*, but some initial advice can form a starting point.