

Test Writing

Exam writing can be regarded as a challenge to yourself to see how well you can demonstrate your knowledge of the course material. However, for some students the requirement of having to write tests and exams for their courses can instill feelings of anxiety or self-doubt. In order to see test writing as a positive experience it is important to be well prepared, to be well rested, to be healthy mentally and physically, and to have confidence in your academic ability.

Before the Exam Begins

- **Look After Your Physical Well-Being.** It is important that you are well rested in order to have optimum concentration abilities. If you have been up studying all night you are not at your best and may even fall asleep, using up precious test-writing time. It is equally important that you eat balanced, nourishing meals. It is hard to concentrate and remember things if you are hungry or if your blood sugar is not at its optimum level.
- **Double Check the Exam Schedule.** Ensure that you are attending the right exam, on the right day and at the right time. You don't need the added anxiety of trying to make up for a missed exam.
- **Bring the Necessary Supplies.** Make sure that you have the necessary materials for writing the test. These supplies may include a calculator with new batteries, pens with full refills, a couple of sharp pencils, and a good eraser. Your instructor will likely inform you, in advance of test day, what items you are permitted to bring into the test room.
- **Arrive Early to the Test Room.** You will be less stressed and better able to concentrate if you arrive with time to spare before the start of the test. This gives you time to find the room, to get settled with your supplies in front of you, and to take a couple of deep breaths before the papers are distributed. Sometimes special instructions are given at the start of the test, and if you arrive a couple of minutes late, you may miss those important instructions.

During the Exam

- **Relax.** Take a deep breath and try to relax. The calmer you stay during the test, the better you will do.
- **Look at the Entire Test.** Look at the structure of the test. Count the pages to ensure that you are not missing any. Decide how you should divide your time, given your strengths and weaknesses. If the test includes different types of questions, begin with the type you do best on to build your confidence. Leave more time for the parts that require more effort or that make up more of your total score. Be sure to leave some time at the end to review your work.
- **Read the Instructions Twice.** The first time that you read the instructions you may not be concentrating fully on the task. The second read through will allow you to pick up on anything that you may have missed the first time.
- **When You are Stuck, Mark the Problem and Move On.** Many of your tests will be taken under time pressure, so you cannot afford to spend too much time probing the depths of your memory. If you have time at the end you can return to any questions that you had to skip.
- **Concentrate Despite Distractions.** Avoid getting caught up in any competition with other students who complete the test early. Do the test at your own pace. If you start daydreaming, mark the item that got you off task and move on, coming back to that item later. Try your best to block out the sounds and motions around you.
- **Ask for Clarification.** When you are confused, ask your instructor or proctor for help. Most instructors try to clarify questions if they can do so without giving away the answer.
- **Learn From the Test.** The test itself may jog your memory. One area of the test might hold clues that could help you with other areas.
- **Proofread Your Work.** Under pressure, it is easy to misspell, miscalculate, and even make errors on things you know well.

Writing the Exam

This section gives a brief overview of strategies that can be used for various exam formats. For a more in-depth look at various strategies, you may benefit from looking at some of the books listed at the end of this tipsheet.

Multiple Choice

- Read the test items carefully and completely.
- Cover up the alternatives and read the stem without distractions. See if the answer comes to you. Then read all of the alternatives before you identify the best one.
- Strike out the wrong answers. When the correct answer is hard to identify, eliminate the wrong choices so you can concentrate on real possibilities.
- Mark your answers clearly and consistently.
- Guess if you are not sure of an answer, if there is no penalty for guessing.

True-False

- If you are not sure of the answer, go with your hunch as you have a 50% chance of being right.
- Don't look for answer patterns. Instructors generally try to make the order of true-false answers random. Focus your energies on the questions themselves.
- Honour exceptions to the rule. If you can think of exceptions to the statement, then the statement is probably false.

Essay Questions

- Anticipate the kinds of questions that may be asked. Think about the course in terms of potential questions and practice predicting and answering those questions.
- Map your ideas to structure your response before you begin to write. Always create an outline before you start writing the essay.
- Balance your argument with examples to demonstrate your understanding of the material.
- Begin by answering the question. In your first paragraph, include a sentence which specifies the line of reasoning that you are about to follow.
- Write legibly. You do not want to lose marks because the instructor could not read your essay!

Problem-Solving Exams

- Write down the important formulae that you are likely to forget because of anxiety.
- Budget your time to the marks given for each question.
- Read over all of the problems first. This allows you to decide which questions are easier for you and to work on them first.
- Write neatly and one step at a time. Often errors are made when work is not recorded systematically. Characters may be misread, numbers miscalculated, and important signs missed.
- Monitor mistakes that you are likely to make. If there is a particular type of mistake that you make, watch out for it on the test.

Resources Available at the Academic Advising & Career Centre

You will find more information on test and examination preparation strategies in some of the study skills books in the Academic Advising & Career Centre (AA&CC). Some books to begin with are: *Learning for Success, 3rd ed.*, *Test Taking Secrets*, and *Making Your Mark*.