

## Exam Preparation

Most courses still conclude with weighty examinations. Effective exam preparation is an important--perhaps the *most* important--study skill. Time is the major requirement: While there are a number of techniques that will make study sessions more productive, and there are important strategies to employ while actually writing the exam, all are best supported by careful preparation over time. The time to begin examination preparation is at the beginning of the course. The following discussion focuses on some of the best-established strategies for exam preparation (organizing time, making summary sheets, and predicting exam questions) and then turns to specific suggestions for writing two common types of examinations: the multiple choice and essay varieties.

### 1. Organizing Time

It cannot be overstated: exam preparation must take place *throughout the term*. Although the most concentrated review generally occurs during the precious final week before exams, material is most thoroughly learned when it is reviewed at regular intervals over a substantial period of time. The days preceding the exam should be used for integration, synthesis, summarizing, and reinforcing material with which you are already familiar. Thus, the first step to effective and lasting learning is arranging a schedule that permits regular review (see Quicknotes for time management). *Do not let developing a schedule delay actual study!* Every extra activity can become a distraction; set up your schedule quickly and efficiently. If your work is overwhelming, schedule what you can and gradually work in the rest.

### 2. Summary Sheets

Preparing summary sheets of lecture and textbook material is a very effective way to study for examinations. First, in summarizing you reduce the volume of material to be reviewed to a manageable amount, and, secondly, through the process of reduction you are forced to place the information into meaningful categories, and this process aids in learning and retrieval. Thirdly, the process itself provides a review of material.

Summarizing requires that you extract essential information and present it in condensed form. As in the Cornell system of note-taking (see the Quicknotes on note-taking), leave a visible key word column: This establishes a quick and efficient review system. Cover the body of the notes, leaving only the key column exposed, and recite the content of your summary.

In a similar manner, prepare summary sheets of textbook markings for review. Do not attempt to reread the textbook just before an exam. It is more important to synthesize the material you have read to gain a perspective on how individual topics fit into the course as a whole.

### 3. Predicting Exam Questions

Find out as much as you can about the exam (length, type of questions, material to be covered), obtain copies of past exams if available, and then put yourself in the place of the instructor. Above all, review your *own* returned work -- quizzes, mid-terms, and assignments. Develop several potential examination questions for each topic or unit. During the final week before the exam, write out answers to your own questions and check them against your lecture and text notes. You will be surprised at the frequency with which you can accurately predict the content of the exam.

### 4. Writing Examinations

Whether the examination you are going to write is a multiple choice or essay type, these six general strategies are effective.

1. Proper rest and good nutrition are essential elements for maintaining concentration. Be sure that you are well rested and have eaten a *balanced* meal before you attempt to write an exam (stimulants tend to backfire).
2. Arrive early and find a spot that has good lighting and from which you can see the blackboard and the clock.
3. If you are prone to exam anxiety, seek help well in advance. Counselling Services at UNB periodically offers workshops in stress management. One simple technique:
  - a) breathe in until your lungs feel completely full;
  - b) take a sudden, quick, extra breath through your open mouth;
  - c) let your breath out slowly. Repeat several times, concentrating on your breathing.
4. Listen carefully for examination instructions (instructors often announce last-minute changes) and read the directions carefully.
5. Before beginning to answer the questions, skim the entire exam quickly and decide how you will apportion your time. A good guideline is to divide your time according to the number of marks for each question.
6. Use any extra time to reread the questions and your responses. Staying until the end of the examination period (or at least being the last person to leave the hall) can only improve your performance.

#### a.) Answering multiple-choice questions

Use the following guidelines to analyze and answer multiple choice questions.

1. Read the directions carefully. If there is no penalty for incorrect responses, answer all questions. Guidelines 9-10 provide suggestions for guessing, should it be necessary.
2. Do questions you are sure of first. Leave the uncertain ones until the end (mark these for later review).

3. Read *all* of the options for each question since you may have to select the one that is the *most* true. Eliminate any responses which you know to be untrue.

4. Watch for the use of negative words (*not, cannot*) or prefixes (*dis-, un-, il-, in-, non-, dis-*), which can create confusion in interpreting statements. Try circling the negative words and re-reading the sentence. Note the double negative in the sentence below:

**It is *illogical* to assume that Thomas Edison's fame was *not* due to his many, practical inventions.**

5. Watch out for qualifiers when considering options. Qualifying words (such as *all, most, some* or *none*) can dramatically affect a statement's meaning. For example, some words imply that the statement is true 100% of the time: *no, never, none, every, always, all, only, entirely, invariably, best*. At first, the statement "all birds can fly" appears true; however, "all" makes it false because of exceptions (e.g., penguins).

6. Try covering up the answers initially. Answer the question *before* looking at the choices; then select the one that matches your response.

7. Use the process of elimination to narrow the choices. Remember that many standard-form tests designed by large companies (e.g., Princeton Testing Service) include predictable traps. Locate and use the logic of the traps to find the correct responses.

8. Review uncertain answers before submitting the exam. Studies of answer-changing on multiple-choice tests show that corrections outnumber second-choice errors *three-to-one*.

*The remaining guidelines are to be used **only** if you still do not have an inkling of the answer after having eliminated the options you know to be incorrect.*

9. The longest response that contains the most detail is often the correct one.

10. When you are faced with a choice of numbers and you cannot eliminate any of the responses through reasoning, select one of the middle options. If two look-alike options are presented, choose between them if you have no idea of the correct response.

## **b.) Answering essay questions**

Essay questions require that you analyze material from the course and express ideas in your own words, usually within prescribed limits of space and time. Take-home exams offer some relief from the pressure of time, but they are often marked very closely. A systematic approach to answering essay questions can be of great assistance, especially given these constraints.

Before beginning to answer any questions, consider these points:

1. Read directions carefully and notice the *number* of questions to be answered.

2. Divide your time according to the value of each question and stick to your plan.

3. Read questions and circle key terms. A list of terms with explanations is included below.

4. While reading the questions, quickly jot down points or cues that come to mind.

5. Consider the difficulty of the questions. If you do better once you have warmed up, begin with the easiest questions. Otherwise, you might wish to work on the difficult ones while you are fresh and skim through the easy ones at the end.

Follow these guidelines when writing your answers:

- Read questions carefully to understand what is being asked. Underline key terms in the question (see table below), and ask the instructor for clarification.
- First organize your thoughts in a separate outline and develop a logical structure.
- Answer the question directly and forcefully in the first sentence (thesis statement), and then develop one main idea in each subsequent paragraph. Conclude with a sentence or two that summarizes your argument.
- The exam marker might not be familiar with your subject, so make your answer complete and coherent without repeating the most elementary information (e.g., all the events of a historical period; the entire plot of a novel).
- Avoid unsupported opinion; use facts and logic, not vague ideas and feelings.
- Use natural language and be concise. A clear response will be more impressive than a muddled and rambling one, however much longer the latter may be.
- Neatness, proper grammar, spelling, and punctuation count. Unless otherwise directed, use ink, double space, and write on only one side of the paper.
- Leave white space on the paper in case you wish to make additions later.

Key Terms	Explanation
Apply	Show how a principle works through an example
Comment	Discuss briefly
Contrast	Emphasize the differences between things
Define	Provide a detailed explanation of meaning
Discuss	Give 1) reasons for or against a position or 2) main causes of a situation
Explain	Show the reasons for or the causes of something
Illustrate	Provide an example
List	Provide a series (for discussion or illustration)
Outline	Make a short summary
Relate	Show the connections between things
State	List points briefly without details
Summarize	Bring together the key points
Trace	Outline main points, emphasizing the connections between them