

Dealing with exams

Using the reading time

In most exams, you will be allowed 15 minutes reading time. Use it wisely. First, make sure that you have been given the correct paper, then read the instructions carefully.

The amount of time you should spend on a question is often indicated. If it is not, once you have read the instructions, you should quickly work out approximately how much time you can spend per mark. In essay based exams, planning your use of time is usually simply a matter of dividing the allotted time by the number of essays required: 4 essays in 3 hours = 45 minutes per essay.

When you begin to read the paper, identify the topics covered, read the questions carefully, and think about the type of writing required. Finally, start planning an answer for one or two of the longer questions.

Understanding the question

Read the question carefully (twice) and identify the instruction words, topic words and any restricting words. This technique should be applied to **all** questions whether they are multiple choice, short answer, labelling tasks or essay questions. For more information, see *Analysing the question*.

Writing answers

Multiple Choice Questions — If you are sure of the answer, there is no problem. If you are not sure of the answer, increase your chances of getting it correct by eliminating answers which are obviously wrong. For each wrong answer you eliminate, your potential score increases. Unless you are penalised for incorrect answers, you should *always* have an answer.

Short Answer Questions — Short answer questions may require one word, a phrase, a sentence or a paragraph. Usually what is required is indicated by the amount of space allowed for your answer and the number of marks allotted to the question. In most cases, short answer questions are testing your command of the facts and content of your course. If a short answer question requires more than one or two sentences, planning is essential. As a general rule, you should spend up to one fifth of the allotted time planning your answer.

Essays — Writing an essay in an exam is different from writing an essay for an assignment since success depends on recall rather than on research. In essay based exams, you are often given a choice of topic. Be careful not to waste too much time deciding which topic to tackle. If you have forty-five minutes to write an essay, you should spend approximately 10 minutes planning your answer.

Many essay questions in exams are argumentative; that is, you are asked to agree or disagree with a given statement. To answer such questions, you need to have an opinion or a line of argument. Think about the question in terms of four possibilities:

1. agree strongly
2. mostly agree
3. mostly disagree
4. disagree strongly.

In your ten minutes of planning time, you should jot down the points you are going to use to support your line of argument. For an exam essay, you will need three to five main points, one of which may involve counter-argument or concession.

In an exam essay, most of your marks will come from the body of the essay, after that, your conclusion is the most important. For this reason, never spend a long time on the introduction, and keep it short — thirty to fifty words. The introduction need only

1. identify the topic
2. indicate your line of argument.

Move on to the body of the essay, and if you have allotted 45 minutes, you would work on the body for about thirty minutes. Expand each major point into a topic sentence, back up your points, usually with specific examples.

If you have planned your essay well, your conclusion will seem to flow naturally from your argument. The conclusion, like the introduction, should be fairly short. It should give a concise summary of your main points and re-state your line of argument.

Allow 5 to 10 minutes to re-read and revise the essay. Check your answers by asking yourself — Have I answered the question? Is this a logical answer? — Is it complete? If not, you still have time to make adjustments. If you run out of time, at least jot down the main points you wanted to make.

After the exam

Avoid wasting time on lengthy post mortems. There is nothing you can do to change your answers, so focus on the next exam. When you have completed your exams, relax and enjoy the extra time you will have available.