

# Revision and exams.

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## Why will this handout be helpful?

Most students will at some time face examinations as part of their assessment. Many students perform poorly in examinations because they do not know how to revise, what to revise or how to answer the questions in exam papers in a way that will achieve good grades.

This handout provides advice in three areas crucial to good exam performance: exam revision, exam technique and mental attitude towards to exams.

## This handout might be especially helpful if...

- **You are coming from School:** and you are not used to taking longer exams covering such a wide range of subjects and revising that much content and then maintaining concentration in the exam might be a challenge.
- **You are coming from College:** and you have been used to continuous assessment with term-time coursework and longer, more formal exams might be stressful.
- **You are new to higher education in the UK:** and you are not sure of what format your exams might take or what will be expected of you.
- **You are returning to education:** and it has been a while since you last sat any sort of test and are nervous

## Introduction:


Exams at university level come in different formats and ask different types of question depending on the course being studied:

Social science and business studies students are more inclined to face essay style exams that entail writing two or three essay answers from a choice of several questions put to them in an exam paper.

Computing and contemporary science students, on the other hand, are more likely to be presented with exams that have a short answer format.

Whatever the design of the exam paper and its content, you the student will have to study for the exam and answer the questions well enough to achieve a good grade. There are ways in which you can revise the information that will help you remember better for an exam, as well as techniques that will help you perform well in the exam.

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## How good are you at the moment?

- **Have you recently had to take an exam?**

**Yes:** You have recently had experience of dealing with exams and exam conditions and have a good idea what to expect this time.

**No:** You have not had to face tests or exams before, or not for a while, and you need to find out more about what you will be expected to do.

- **Are you confident you know what exams at degree level will entail?**

**Yes:** You have recently taken exams at this level, know how to prepare for them and have an idea what the markers are looking for.

**No:** You are unsure what the exam format will be and the type of questions you will be asked. You need to find out whether the exam will involve short answer questions, require essay length answers or have a multiple choice essay format. You also need help on how best to prepare for the exam.

- **Do you know what information to study for your exams?**

**Yes:** You are confident that the information to be studied can be found in your lecture notes and in the required reading for the module. You know this may be anything from mathematical procedures, case studies and practical examples, theoretical perspectives or scientific outcomes, depending on the modules you have been studying.

**No:** You are not all that sure what type of information you will be tested on and need to remind yourself what was covered by the module.

- **Are you confident you can tackle exams at degree level and perform well enough to achieve good grades?**

**Yes:** You have a positive attitude towards exams and are confident you can manage to pass.

**No:** You are worried about sitting degree level exams and are apprehensive and are not confident that you will do well.

## How did you do?

If most of your answers are 'yes' then you have the confidence and the knowledge to prepare and perform well in your exams. However this handout will give you tips that will enhance your exam preparation and technique.

If you mainly answered 'no' then you can use this handout for ideas on how to find out about the format of your exams, the type of question you will face and what is expected of you. You can also use this handout to acquire good exam revision and exam performance tips.

## Questions and answers:

- **How do you go about finding about the exam format you will face?**

A sensible first step in finding out what you are likely to face is by looking for past exam papers for the modules you are to be assessed on. Past papers can be found in the OASIS section of the Abertay portal. A past paper for the exam you are about to sit will give you a very good idea of the format of the exam, for example whether it is a short answer or essay answer exam. Past papers also give you a good indication of the type of questions you will face.

- **What is the best way to revise for exams?**

High-quality revision plays a crucial role in exam preparation. There are two aspects of revision that should be taken into account. First, make sure that you are revising the right information that might be assessed in the exam. Second, revise in a way that will help you remember and use it all on the day of the exam. The first aspect can be addressed by looking over your lecture notes and listing all the key theoretical perspectives and ideas that the lecturer has covered. The second aspect can be addressed by practising the sorts of tasks you will be given in the exam, such as writing practice essay plans for an essay-type exam or setting yourself quizzes to prepare for multiple-choice tests.

A good study method is to plan a day-to-day schedule including: the topics to be revised, how long you will spend on each topic, how you will revise – eg: note-taking, trying practice questions and a box to tick when you finish each topic.

However, make sure your timetable is realistic: take into account all your other commitments - eg: employment, family and always Include time for relaxation. Don't exhaust yourself: revise in small periods no longer than hour, then take a break for 10 minutes before moving on to another activity. Try to mix the revision methods used.

- **How can you stop revision becoming boring?**

Good revision is active revision so use different revision methods and stop it becoming too boring. For different active revision methods that can be used, see the '**How to Practise**' section below).

- **How do you tackle multiple choice and short answer exams?**

A good strategy to adopt when tackling this type of exam is the '3-wave technique' (see '**How to Practise**' below). Some students study hard for multiple choice and short answer exams but fail to convert this hard work into good grades by failing to adopt a simple strategy such as the 3-wave technique.

- The focus when revising for multiple choice and short answer exams is on facts. These types of exams test your ability to recall important information such as jargon and theories.
- Use your lecture notes as a guide to which topics to revise.
- Write a realistic revision timetable: Include the topics to be revised.
- How you are going to revise, eg: reading notes or practising past papers.
- How long you will spend on each topic, including short break every hour or so.
- A box to tick when you have finished each topic.
- Think about what questions you might be asked.
- Look at past papers on OASIS.

- **What is the best way to revise for essay answer exams?**

Essay exams test some or all of the following: how much you can remember of the topic, your understanding of the topic, how well you can apply what you have learned, how well you understand the question, whether you can argue a point of view, your ability to criticise and analyse, how well you can write in a set time and how well you cope under pressure. Also, exams give your tutors a guarantee that the work they are marking is all your own. Even when you have done well all term, you can still let yourself down through poor revision and poor exam technique.

There are some basic procedures you can use for good revision. You can organize all your lecture notes and handouts. Use highlighters and folder dividers to make the organization of your notes clear. This sorting out will give you an overview of the topics you need to revise for your exam. You can plan a day-to-day schedule that can include: the topics to be revised, how long you will spend on each topic, how you will revise, for example note-taking, trying practice questions and a box to tick when you finish each topic.

Make sure your timetable is realistic, take into account all your other commitments for example employment, family and include time for relaxation.

Stress can affect the memory and ultimately exam performance, poor preparation and fear of exams may cause stress. You should not fear or resent exams; view them as a challenge, try to adopt a positive mental attitude. Treat revision for exams just like athletes view training for a competition: always psych yourself up to succeed.

- **Is there a good technique for writing essays style exams?**

In the exam, carefully read all instructions on the exam paper, especially options of questions to answer. Think about time management in the exam, for example if you have to write two essays in two hours, plan to spend roughly 50 minutes on each. Plan to leave at least 10 minutes at the end of the exam to check for mistakes and to add in information you have missed. Never leave an exam early always keep working right until the end. When choosing your questions can be vital, your first question should be the one you are more confident of answering well. This gets you started working immediately, steadies the nerves and gives you confidence. Starting with a harder one first may increase the amount of time spent on the first essay, causing you to panic and to rush the second question.

Next, brainstorm the question and then organise these ideas into a rough plan. Brainstorming works well because it can bring up information you have been studying that might be buried in your subconscious. Always try and answer the question, just writing all you know about the topic is not enough to get you a good mark in a written essay exam!

You should consider the writing style for essay exams. Your essay should be written as legibly as possible, in clear English and structured simply with a clear development of ideas.

You should check your essay carefully after you finish writing for grammar, punctuation and spelling. Referencing is largely relaxed for an essay style exam, you do not need to include references during the essay or write a bibliography at the end.

## How to practise:

- **Active Revision Techniques**
  - Summarise the notes you have on each topic: look for just the most important information until you can fit everything you need to know on just one side of A4. Then try to cut it down even more to just key words and phrases.
  - Another active revision method is to try mind maps: use colours, highlighting to make the notes distinctive. You can also set yourself questions from your revision notes to answer: check your answers using the original notes. Fill in forgotten facts with a different coloured pen then repeat the process until you can complete all the gaps.
  - Once you have studied for a period of time you may consider using past papers available from OASIS: You can practise writing outline answers and try writing full answers against the clock. Or setting yourself quizzes to see how many questions you can answer.
  
- **The 3-wave technique:**
  - **Wave 1:**
    - Read through the exam paper.
    - **Tick** the questions you can definitely answer.
    - **Circle** the questions you want to think about for a bit longer before you answer them.
    - Put a **cross** next to questions you don't know the answer to.
    - Go back and answer all the questions you ticked. Getting the easy ones done first should settle your nerves and boost your confidence.
  - **Wave 2:**
    - Tackle the questions you circled - the ones that need a bit more thought.
  - **Wave 3:**
    - Finish with the hardest questions, which you put a cross next to. Hopefully, your revision will have done the trick and there won't be too many of these.
  
  - **After you have completed the paper:**
    - If you have finished answering all the questions and still have time left, check over all your answers carefully to make sure you have not made any mistakes.
    - In exam conditions you may be very nervous, tense and working on adrenaline. You are more likely to make silly errors if you are anxious.
  
  - **Check everything you do!**
    - Always read again through the different possible answers to the question very carefully: some answers to the question may seem very similar.
    - Never leave the exam early or sit waiting and doing nothing at the end: use every second of the exam time to check and recheck your answers.
  
- **A technique for writing essay style exams**
  - The first thing you should do before writing an answer is pull your ideas together. Quickly brainstorm some basic ideas about the question. Write these down on paper in any order. The more ideas you have, the more can select when you start to write. Add any ideas that occur to you while you are writing to the list.
  
  - The next stage is to plan your essay by reorganising the ideas you brainstormed into a logical order. Delete irrelevant initial ideas that will not help answer the question. You can then write out a rough essay structure using headings and sub-headings: an introduction with main points and basic background information and a main body that deals with each point in the question in turn. Do not worry yet about a conclusion; you should be able to do this after you have written rest of the essay (see box below).

## Sample essay plan:

### The question:

“The Market Price of any factor of production is determined by supply and demand.” Briefly explain this statement and discuss its relevance to the ways in which wages are determined in modern industrial society.

Although the question looks complicated, it can be broken down into two parts:

Briefly explaining the statement.

Discussing its relevance to how wages are determined.

#### 1. **Introduction** - the brief explanation:

Meaning of terms.

Simple supply and demand theory

#### 2. **Development** - the discussion. Take each important factor and discuss its relevance to the question in turn – e.g.:

a) Differences between the public and private sectors.

b) Role of unions.

c) Effect of labour laws.

Try to include a relevant example for each main point that you make.

#### 3. **Conclusion**: brief summary of the discussion.

### The main points again:

- It is not just the quantity of revision but the quality as well: make sure you are studying the correct information and you are actively working with the information to enhance your memory of it.
- The 3-wave method can be an effective method of tackling a multiple choice or short answer exam.
- When sitting an essay answer style exam brainstorm ideas then use these ideas to plan an essay answer that will answer the question. Avoid just writing down everything you know about the subject.

### Want more?

#### Abertay guides:

Please see our other guides at <http://www.abertay.ac.uk/studying/support/academic/guides>

#### Useful web links:

The Student Academic Support website study skills database, which can be found at <http://www.abertay.ac.uk/studying/support/academic/>, has a list of useful websites to help with exams. Here is a selection:

- **BBC**: The Surgery revision advice – [http://www.bbc.co.uk/surgery/your\\_world/school\\_studying/exams\\_revision\\_basics/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/surgery/your_world/school_studying/exams_revision_basics/).
- **Biz/Ed**: Basic and general study skills, provide revision and exam help, and offer coursework advice – <http://www.bized.co.uk/reference/studyskills/index.htm>.
- **Revision Aid**: online educational resource – <http://www.revisionaid.co.uk/>.

#### At Abertay:

- **English as a foreign language**: Amanda Olivier ([a.olivier@abertay.ac.uk](mailto:a.olivier@abertay.ac.uk)).
- **Advice for disabled students** (including dyslexia): Jonathan Staal ([j.staal@abertay.ac.uk](mailto:j.staal@abertay.ac.uk)).

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