What does the examiner want?
Some tips to help you understand the aims and purposes of exams in Higher Education.

1. Why do exams? - As well as a tool for assessment, revising for exams will help you to consolidate your understanding and your subject knowledge. Taking exams will give you practise in focusing and selecting as well as working to a time limit: these are valuable transferable skills.

2. What does the examiner want? - Different things for different disciplines and courses, but the basic requirements remain the same - understanding, critical thinking, communication skills.

3. How can I demonstrate understanding? - Read the question carefully and make sure you answer it. Keep showing how your arguments and evidence answer the question. Make connections between topics and set your answer in the context of the course as a whole.

4. How can I show critical thinking? - Start from your own answer to the question, or thoughts about the topic. Use what you’ve learnt in your course as evidence to support or oppose your arguments. Be aware of the major issues and debates in your topic. Don’t just accept the things you’ve read or been told – ask yourself if you agree, and if not, why not?

5. How do I demonstrate my communication skills? - Plan how you’re going to answer - a mini plan can be just a few words to remind you. Select your content carefully so it remains relevant to the question. Structure your answer clearly so your argument doesn't get lost.

6. What’s the best way to prepare for exams? - Put your learning in context. Look for the connections between topics to improve your understanding. Practice writing timed exam answers.

7. How can I make my argument clear? - Plan your answer and tell the marker how you plan to answer in your introduction - it’s called signposting.

8. How can I make my answer readable? - Practice writing by hand. As you get closer to exam time, give up writing on the computer altogether – it’s a different working process. If you have time, proof read your answers - it’s an easy way to avoid losing silly marks.

9. The top tip for getting a better mark? - Read the question carefully – the most common complaint of examiners is that the student didn’t answer, or didn’t understand question. Get used to the way exam questions are worded; don’t just assume you know what it’s about because you catch sight of a key word.

10. What does the examiner not want? - Everything you’ve ever read on the topic; an old coursework essay learnt by heart and reproduced regardless of whether it answers the question; meticulous referencing (key authors' names and titles are usually sufficient); a list of memorised dates; your opinion, unsupported by argument or evidence (“I think”, “in my opinion”).