PREPARING FOR EXAMS

Few people genuinely enjoy exams. It's always anxiety-provoking when you feel you're being assessed, and can be worse if you don't know what success might look like, or how to best prepare. Feeling confident about these aspects will make the exam itself a less daunting experience.

This guide includes expert advice to help you to get your exam preparation sorted, with strategies for planning your revision for maximum efficiency, making sure you get the most out of the revision you do, and helping you to feel better prepared for the moment you sit down in the exam room.

Planning your revision

The best approach to revision is to prepare for it throughout the year by spending a short amount of time each week thinking about what you have learnt in each of your modules, and writing a page of notes including your own understanding and any questions you may have. Then you can treat these notes as the basis for more detailed revision later in the year.

However, most students don't start revising until after taught classes have finished. With much to cover in a short time, it's essential to think carefully about how, when and what to revise. Try not to leave starting too late, or you may find it difficult to get access to resources and advice from your tutors. Do attend any revision classes that are offered by your department.

One thing that's never a good idea is cramming at the last minute! It may have got you through A-levels but will not work so well at university level where you need to have processed your learning so that you can communicate an understanding of your subject rather than just memorising information.

Getting organised

Start to organise your revision by selecting the topics you're going to revise for each exam paper. Choose topics that are basic to the understanding of the subject. It's also a good idea to choose topics that you enjoy or already understand well. Have a look at some past papers first if possible to see how many questions you will have to answer and make sure that the number of topics you've chosen allows enough choice of questions.

Plan your time – be realistic and don't make a schedule that's too inflexible or onerous as you're less likely to stick to it. Some people work better under pressure, but don't leave it all till the last minute. You'll probably need to allocate more time to topics you are less confident in, however tempting it is to just work on the ones you like.

Download past exam papers – these give you experience of the kind of question that might be asked, and get you used to what the paper looks like before you enter the exam room. Use them to practise reading and understanding the question; identifying topics; planning answers; and writing timed answers. If there aren't any past papers available, ask your tutor if practice questions will be available; or use any questions you may have from past assignments.

Find out what the examiner wants – examiners are looking for an understanding of the topic, not just a good memory. They want you to show that you can apply your knowledge to answer the question. So some of the questions you get may look as if they are not something you've been taught - but a bit of thinking will show you how you can apply the things you have been taught. Practise this skill before the exam by setting your revision in context – how does this topic link to others? What are the major debates and issues?
Think critically: do you agree or disagree with what has been said? Can you explain why? Is there evidence for or against your view? And keep asking yourself, how would I use this information to answer a question?

**Tip...** If you are entitled to any special arrangements for exams (for instance, if you have extra time or are allowed to use a computer, or have a scribe), now's a good time to make sure that these are in place. When you get your exam timetable, check the rooms - they should be different to your classmates. If you are at all unsure, contact the Examinations Office as soon as possible.

### Filling in gaps in knowledge

Revision is about reminding yourself of what you've already learnt, and identifying the gaps you need to fill once you have an overview.

*Practise active reading* – write down what you know about a topic already, then make a list of what you need to know more about (methods, theories, issues, order of events etc). Look for these in your reading. If you are unsure about a topic, start small with a paragraph (e.g. in a subject dictionary) that gives a general overview. Read with exam questions in mind. How does this reading help you answer these questions? Is it evidence for a particular argument? For more on this, see our guide on Reading and notemaking.

*Do more thinking, less note-taking* – read without a pen in your hand, or you'll be tempted to write down everything. Read a page or section, then stop and think about what you've just read. Write brief notes and read them through. Thinking and reflecting makes understanding, and can be done any time or place, - on the bus, in the gym, walking to uni.

*Make your notes memorable.* Use subheadings, bullet points, and colours. Spidergrams are useful for showing whole topics with main points and supporting evidence all on one page. In the exam you will not have time to write in details of studies, so just note down main points. For more on this, see our guide on Reading and notemaking.

### Having a revision routine

*Set times, targets and rewards* – It's a good idea to decide on your most alert times of day (morning, afternoon or evening) and commit to fixed revision sessions so you don't waste time. Have a list of achievable targets for each session and tick them off to motivate yourself. Set up short-term rewards (coffee break, chat with friend, gym session, videogame, cake) and keep your long-term reward in mind – to do as well as you deserve in the exam by being properly prepared.

*Work out a revision timetable* if you have a whole week (or several weeks) in which to revise. Keep at least one day free for relaxation and make sure you cover each of your exam papers. Don't make it too inflexible - build in some wiggle time so that when the unexpected happens (good or bad!), you can reorganise your time around it. It's not a good idea to revise one whole paper before going on to the next - if you swap subjects regularly you'll make connections which will help the material to become embedded in your memory.

*Work in blocks of two to three hours* with minibreaks. Try not to spend a whole day focusing on the same module - if you change to a new one after a 2 - 3 hour block, you'll feel refreshed and get more done. Over your week try to do at least one study block for each paper requiring revision. It will avoid the "I've run out of time and haven't looked at anything on paper X!" crisis.

*Test yourself* – after you have revised a topic, test yourself. Then test your self again the next day! Write a sheet of notes without checking what you've already written – you might include main issues and debates, major theories, formulae, connections to other topics, ideas you may have had while reading.

*Write timed answers* – when you get closer to exam time, it's really important to practise writing some timed answers by hand. Work out how much time you'll have in the exam for each answer. Aim to spend a little more time at first – then speed up with each answer you write. Don't refer to notes. This is a great way to get used to writing by hand, get a clear idea of how much you can write in the time, and find out what gaps you
have that might need to be filled with more targeted revision.

Revise with friends? Some people find it helpful to learn by discussing questions or topics with friends. If this is you, set up a study group - perhaps book a classroom or study pod to meet in. Two things you shouldn't do though: don't compare the amount of time you're spending to others, as everyone works differently; don't try to learn shared practice answers, as you could find yourself being accused of a form of plagiarism called collusion.

Be nice to yourself! Work effectively not virtuously - if you plan and focus your revision you shouldn't have to work 24/7. Studying is a mentally tiring occupation which can't be maintained at a high level for long periods of time. Your brain needs downtime to process the information it's been given, so take regular breaks, make time for exercise and socialising, eat healthily and get enough sleep.

If you're feeling anxious...

Some students get extremely anxious whilst doing exams. It will help to feel prepared – the strategies in this series of guides aim to help you to do that. If you are still anxious, and are worried that this will affect your performance, do come and discuss this with a Study Adviser or someone from Student Wellbeing. The Chaplaincy also offer regular sessions open to all students to teach relaxation techniques.

Revision and memory strategies

Many students worry about memory especially in relation to exams. This guide offers advice on ways to improve your memory while revising. Not all of these suggestions will be effective for everybody, so experiment and find what works for you.

In exams, for most modules, you will not be expected to be able to repeat information by rote. University exams are designed to test your ability to apply information by applying facts and ideas to the question being asked. You will need to be able to see the links between ideas quickly and select the most relevant information to include in your answer.

If you are anxious about exams RUSU, Student Wellbeing and the Chaplaincy all run sessions in the exam period to teach relaxation techniques.

When and how to revise

What's the best time to revise...?

Time of day - Think about when you work best (morning, afternoon or evening). When you need to learn facts, try to revise when you are most alert and focused.

Taking breaks - Take regular breaks to let your memory recover and absorb the information you have just studied. You will learn best if you revise material, have a sleep and then review the material the next day.

Pacing your learning - You will learn best if you spread your learning of a particular topic over an extended period of time. Rather than focusing on similar information for a whole day, change topics completely. When you next pick up a revised topic take a short time to recall what you learned previously and then build on it with new information.

What's the best way to revise...?

Passive learning does not work! - It's not effective to read your notes over and over, copy out notes or highlight bits of handouts. You need to think actively about ideas if you are going to remember them.

Learn actively by thinking, understanding and connecting the things you are trying to learn to your existing ideas and knowledge. Consider how the information can be used to answer exam questions from past papers. Is it a theory? Or supporting evidence? Do you agree with it?

Ask yourself…

- "What have I just learnt?"
- "How could I use it to answer an exam question?"

Strategies for understanding

Make sense of the information - Information is hard to remember if it does not make sense. So you need to understand what you are trying to learn and relate it to things you already know.
Use your own words when writing revision notes as this connects the ideas to your understanding.

Think about the material... and look for similarities and differences between new information and what you already know. Why was the research valuable? Has it been replicated? Does it support old theories or suggest new ones?

Explain the idea to a friend as this helps you to organise the ideas and ensures that you have really understood them.

Organise the information - It is easier to remember well organised information. Try to find a meaningful structure for the information. Identify the most significant points, break down ideas into sections. Make a spidergram to summarise ideas and evidence. It is easier to remember one series of connected ideas rather than a lot of separate points.

Make the information more memorable – One way is to generate sounds or images to go with the information and form mental images to go with the ideas. Or make a spidergram using colours to create a visual image.

Strategies for rote learning

Learning formulae and brief facts - Start learning formulae early in your revision and learn one at a time. Write the information out in colour on a card and stick it somewhere prominent, e.g. by the kettle or in the bathroom. Look at it every time you pass by. Test yourself. If you know it then put another formula in a different colour by the kettle and add the old one to a pile that you test yourself on regularly.

Mnemonics - These can be a useful way to learn facts. Use the first letter of each word to create an easily remembered phrase or word e.g. Richard Of York Gave Battle In Vain (colours of the rainbow in order: Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo, Violet).

Using music - if you're good at remembering song lyrics, you might try choosing a song and replacing the lyrics with the formulae or phrases you need to remember.

Remembering what you've learnt

The revision cycle. To get the most from your revision, test yourself again and again but with increasing gaps between tests:

1. 10 minutes after learning something (e.g. at the end of the 10 minute study break which you take after learning the topic).
2. 1 day later at the beginning of a revision session.
3. 3 days later...
4. 1 week later.....etc

If you can't remember the information at any point in the cycle, go over it again briefly and then go back to (1).

Remembering

Practice planning lots of answers to old exam questions. You don't have to write the answer out in full. Practice plans will get you used to interpreting questions, then choosing and ordering what you know in order to answer them. During the exam this will help your ability to retrieve information quickly and see how to apply it to the particular question.

Stay calm

During exams stay calm. If you can't remember something move on to another topic. Your mind is likely to remember the information once you stop searching for it.

Answering exam questions

The best possible way to feel less anxious about exams is to be prepared. That means doing your revision, getting used to writing by hand, practising writing timed exam answers, and getting yourself informed about what to expect when you get to the exam room. The less you leave to the last minute, the more relaxed you'll feel, freeing yourself up to focus all your energy on getting the results your deserve. So thinking beforehand about the strategies you might use in the exam room to plan and write your answers will help you to feel calmer and more prepared.
The night before the exam

Check all your information – Make sure you know exactly where your exam will be – the venues may be different for each exam. Gather what you will need to take into the exam room (pens, water, allowed texts, calculator, campus card etc). The Exams Office have various guides for students that will tell you everything you need to know.

Some tips to help you sleep...

- Stop revising 90 minutes before preparing for bed and find a way to relax - perhaps with friends, music, book, TV etc
- Avoid smartphone, tablet and laptop screens for an hour before you plan to go to bed. The type of light used to illuminate them can disrupt your sleep rhythms.
- Have a warm bath or shower and try a relaxation exercise.
- Lavender oil, herbal sleep tablets and camomile tea may be helpful but try them before to see how your body responds.
- Avoid too much alcohol or caffeine, and sleep medications especially if they've been prescribed for someone else.
- If your head's still buzzing with thoughts in the middle of the night, have a notebook by the side of the bed and write them down

Student Wellbeing, RUSU and the Chaplaincy all offer relaxation sessions around exam time.

In the exam room

Read the instructions carefully – Before looking at the actual questions, read the rubric (instructions). Are there compulsory questions? You can lose more marks by answering the wrong number or wrong combination of questions than by answering the right number of questions badly.

Work out the timing – Divide your time according to the number of questions to be answered. Split it proportionately if you have some questions (or parts of questions) which attract more marks than others. Allow some time for planning. An example might be: four essay questions each attracting 25% of the total marks in a three-hour exam = 45 minutes per question = 5 minutes planning, 35 minutes writing, 5 minutes checking through. Allow extra checking time for statistics or calculations.

Read the questions carefully. Read through the paper once before you choose your questions and then re-read each question. You might think a topic you’ve revised hasn't come up, when it is there but the wording is unusual. Alternatively you have revised the topic, but the question is obtuse and you do not fully understand it.

Choose your best questions - Mark any questions you might answer, and then check that you fully understand it. Do you have some relevant knowledge, ideas and evidence for the ones you choose to answer? If you do not understand a question, it's best to leave it.

Decide on question order. Some people like to start with the topic they know best to give them a good start. Others prefer to do their best question second, because with one question completed, they can relax and expand on their best ideas and gain extra marks.

One of the most frequent complaints of markers is that the student did not answer the question. Paraphrasing it (re-writing it in your own words) can help you to make sure you have the right meaning. (There is no answer sheet for this exercise as there might be several ways of re-writing the question. Try swapping answers with a friend to see how they rewrite the same question.)

Maximising your marks

Think about what the question is actually asking. What are you expected to include in your answer? What material will be relevant? The most common complaint from markers is that the student didn’t answer the question.

Structure your answer - Even though you're writing under time pressure, you should still think about the best structure to communicate your ideas. In your introduction show how you understand the question and outline how you will answer it. Make one point or argument per paragraph and summarise to show how it answers the question. Shortish paragraphs with one or two pieces of evidence are sufficient. In
your conclusion summarise the arguments to answer the question.

*Plan before you write* – The stress of working under time constraints in the exam room can make all your good study intentions disappear. However, this is when it's more important than ever to get your ideas across clearly and concisely. Take a few minutes to think and make a mini-plan:

* Underline the key words in the question;
* Identify the main topic and discussion areas..
* Choose a few points/arguments about which you can write.
* Make a mini-plan which puts them in order before you start writing. You can cross it through afterwards.

*Referencing in exams* – You should be able to refer by name (spelt correctly!) to the main theorists/researchers in your topic, giving the approximate year of their major works. You are not expected to give page numbers or lengthy quotes, except in open book exams, and you do not need a reference list.

**Tip:** When you're writing under time constraints, you don't have the luxury of working up to your point! In each paragraph, make your point early and clearly, then give your evidence and analysis to support it, and end with a concluding sentence that shows how the point responds to the question.

*What to do if your mind goes blank* – most students fear this happening. If it does – put your pen down, take a deep breath, sit back and relax for a moment. If you're in the middle of an answer, read through what you have written so far as if it was a story – what happens next? If you have to remember formulae, you could try associating them with pictures or music while revising - then use the associations to bring them back in the exam. If you really can't progress with this answer, leave a gap. It will probably come back to you once you are less anxious.

*If you are running out of time* – don’t panic. Look at the questions you have left to answer and divide up your remaining time to cover them all. Be very economical – make one point support it with evidence and then move on to the next point. If you really can't finish in time, briefly list the points you wanted to make – they could pick you up a few marks.

*What not to write*

Don't try to shoehorn in something interesting just because you have revised it. If it isn't relevant to the question it can lose you marks.

Don't repeat a memorised essay just because it seems to be on the right topic. The question may be asking for a different approach.

Don't use text speak or colloquialisms.

Don't say "I think" or "in my opinion". Instead have ideas that are supported or opposed by your evidence.

Above all, don't be tempted to write a note to the examiner explaining how you missed the lectures on this topic because your housemate stole your alarm clock….

*After the exam*

Beware the post-mortem – it's natural to want to discuss how it went with your friends, but keep it in perspective. Exams are dramatic events, and the temptation is to describe them dramatically – "The easiest/hardest/fastest exam I've ever done!" No two exam experiences will be the same – that doesn't mean you are wrong and they are right, or vice versa.

Between exams, you might find it helpful to practise writing exam answers using past papers. However, it may be more beneficial for some students to relax and rest between exams, than cramming in last minute revision for the next one.

*Types of exam questions*

While many exams require you to write essay-style questions, there are various formats that you might be asked to respond to. Short answer questions, for instance, often appear in disciplines where it is important to have both factual knowledge and the ability to apply it to real-life situations. You may need to practise using your time for answering in a very specific way for this kind of question where different sections attract
different proportions of the overall points available.

This page looks at the particular kinds of preparation that will be helpful for specific types of exam. If you have a type of exam that is not mentioned here, do come and chat to a Study Adviser.

**Short answer questions**

Short answer questions usually require a briefer and more descriptive answer than essay questions, which ask you to discuss and expand on a topic.

*Revising for short answer questions…*

* Short answer questions typically ask you to "explain", "define" or "list". Make sure you know which are the key terms and theories for your topic that you might be asked to communicate in these ways.
* As you’re revising each topic, write a sheet of important points and summaries to get used to identifying and explaining significant ideas.
* Make sure you know the terms frequently used in short answer questions and understand what they are asking you to do.
* Look at past exam papers for your topic to see how short answer questions are typically posed, and how many marks each part attracts.
* Practice writing succinct answers.

*Answering short answer questions…*

* If your questions all ask for short answers with an equal number of marks for each, divide your time up equally for the total number of questions. Otherwise allocate your time according to the proportion of marks each part attracts.
* If you have questions which are a mix of short and essay answers, check the rubric carefully so you don't miss answering part of the question.
* Each part of the question should show the maximum marks you can get for answering it. Don't waste a lot of time worrying about a part of the question that only attracts a very few marks.
* Use parts of questions that ask for definitions or explanations to inform the longer, more discursive part of your answer. Don't repeat the information you give in one part of the question in the other.
* If a question asks you to "briefly comment", treat it as a mini-essay - have a sentence or two to introduce your topic; select a few points to discuss with a sentence or two about each; add a concluding sentence that sums up your overall view.
* If you have trouble working out how to start answering a question that asks you to "explain", imagine you are telling a friend about the topic.

**Multiple choice questions**

Multiple Choice Question tests should be approached differently to exams that ask for essay-type answers. The answers required are usually more concerned with terms and definitions.

*Revising for multiple choice questions…*

* Concentrate on terms and definitions. To learn things by rote, write information on a card and stick it somewhere you will look often e.g. by the kettle or in the bathroom. Look at it for a day or so every time you pass by.
* Test yourself on facts. Try testing yourself about ten minutes after you’re read something - if you remember it then, test yourself again after a day.
* Practise with past test questions if possible. Don't worry too much about timing, but get used to using strategies for working out best answers.
* Look out for other possible questions and answers while revising. If you have any past test questions, think about the kind of questions that are asked.

*Answering multiple choice questions…*

* Read the directions very carefully before you start.
* When looking at the questions, always try to work out what the answer is before you look at the possibilities.
* Use a ruler to make it easier to see where to enter each answer.
* Answer the questions you know first, mark the ones you are fairly sure of and go back to them - leave the difficult ones till last.
* Remember that with MCQ exams you could get 100% - pretty much impossible in an essay-type exam! So don’t dwell on a question – move on and come back to it if you have time.
* If you finish before the time is up, go back over your questions and answers to check for reading errors.

**Open book exams**

Open book exams (i.e. those where you are allowed to take and consult texts into the exam room) may feel less stressful because you know you won't need to remember facts. However, this means the marks you can get will depend on your ability to use this information to build an argument, so be careful to avoid just giving a list of quotes.

**Revising for an open-book exam...**

* Open book exams focus attention on your understanding of the topic, and your ability to communicate it. Concentrate on this when revising, rather than trying to remember facts.
* If you are working from a literary text, make a list of significant events in the order they occur in the text. Learn the order so you will be able to find them quickly in the exam room. If you know your text well, you won’t waste time searching through it.
* Make sure you know what is allowed and what isn’t. You may not be allowed to mark pages with bookmarks or tags, or the amount of annotating may be restricted.
* Check that you have the correct edition of an allowed text book. Earlier or later editions may be quite different.

**Answering questions in an open-book exam...**

* Don’t forget to take the text to the exam room! You won’t be able to borrow someone else’s.
* Don’t be tempted to waste time in the exam searching the text for new quotes or information. Use it only for quick reference or confirming information or quotes you already know.

* Plan your essays without referring to the text - otherwise you may be tempted to use a previously planned but irrelevant answer. Remember that what's being assessed is your understanding of the topic, and to show that you must give a relevant answer to the question.
* Think before you quote - make sure quotes support your argument, not replace it. Note that you will only gain marks for your own arguments, not someone else's words, so don't waste time copying long quotes.
* Integrate mini-quotes of three or four words so that they occur naturally in a sentence: e.g. The blinded Oedipus' desire to be "far from sight" (1570) reflects both his abhorrence of knowledge, and of others knowing him.
* If you use direct quotations or paraphrases from your text, you should acknowledge them with page or line number in the body of your answer, plus author's name and year of publication the first time the text is mentioned, just as in an essay. However you don't need to include a bibliography or reference list.

**Oral exams**

Oral exams for languages provoke similar anxieties to giving presentations. In both cases, the more prepared you feel, the less anxious you will be.

**Revising for an oral exam for a language course...**

* Listen to, or watch a radio or television channel in your chosen language. Even if you don’t understand all the vocabulary, get used to the rhythm and expression of the language.
* Practice with another student studying the same language (or better still, a native speaker). Set yourselves a topic and talk to each other for a set time. Set forfeits for lapses into English!
* If you have been given topics to talk about in the exam, make sure you know the key vocabulary.
* Learn conversational pleasantries in your chosen language like “Good morning”, “Pleased to meet you”, “Excuse me”, “Sorry”, “Please”, “Thank you” and “Goodbye” and use them with
your friends in the run-up to the exam so that they become automatic.

* Undertaking an oral exam...

  * Act confident even if you aren't. Smile when you enter the room and shake hands with the examiner. Make eye contact during the exam. Ask questions as well as responding to them. Thank the examiner when you leave.
  * Breathe deeply and regularly to calm nerves. Take a bottle of water in case your mouth is dry - slightly warm is better than ice-cold.
  * Take your time! Don't rush into giving an answer before you've thought about what you want to say - you will get confused and make mistakes. Take a breath and think before you speak.
  * Listen to the whole question carefully before you start constructing your answer. It's tempting to latch on to one word that you recognise and start thinking of your answer, but don't - you may miss an important part of the question.
  * Know how to say "Could you repeat that please?" in the language you are being examined in. If you missed part of a question or didn't understand it, ask for it to be repeated.
  * Some people deal with public speaking best by putting on a 'disguise' - dressing more smartly than usual, or wearing glasses if you usually wear contact lenses, for instance. Others feel better if they are more casual and can pretend it's an ordinary situation. Think about how you would deal with this best.

* Seen exams

For some exams, students are given the question ahead of the exam, giving them time to research and prepare. Students are usually not allowed to take in texts or notes to these exams.

If you are given a 'seen' exam paper, it's very tempting to try to write and then learn an essay by heart. This is unlikely to give you the best result. You might think of a seen exam as being the opposite of a memory test; if you try to learn an essay by heart, you will inevitably make some errors in rewriting it, and if you haven't taken the time to understand the topic you won't be able to correct them coherently. You will also be writing to a specified time in the exam room, and writing by hand. This means that you will not be able to write the same amount, or in the same way that you would if you were working at your computer at home. You may also be marked more strictly on a seen question as the element of guesswork that goes into revising for unseen papers has been removed.

It can be useful to do some preparation before you receive the question: for example making sure you have all the relevant lecture or seminar notes and have filled in any gaps in your understanding. If you have a solid understanding of the basics before the seen question is released, you will be able to research your answer more efficiently. The important aspects of preparing good essays will still apply: so avoid simply regurgitating notes from lectures or seminars, but instead demonstrate that you can build on the basic knowledge by researching the specific question that has been set.

Students sometimes prepare for seen exams in small groups, but this can be an extremely risky strategy, laying you open to accusations of collusion and plagiarism if parts of your answer look similar to those produced by others. It's best to avoid this by not discussing your research or essay plans in detail - the process of preparing for a seen exam should be your own.

An effective way to approach revising for a seen question is to read, analyse and research the essay title as normal. Once you have researched your essay title, write a plan using your notes so you can see the connections and flow of ideas, then you can use this plan to refer to in your revision. Now write a draft essay (by hand) checking your plan and notes if necessary. Next write it again, this time keeping to the time you will have in the exam and without too much checking of your essay plan or notes. Finally write another version without checking your plan at all. If there's something you can't recall or reconstruct that you need to discuss, mark it in the essay and fill the gap afterwards as usual. When you go into the exam, have the expectation that you're going to write a new essay on a topic you're familiar with, rather than trying to memorise the old one. This will make your writing fresh and engaged,
and much more coherent. It will also give you the
chance to make new connections and include
material you might not have included the first time
round.

Assessment by examination in UK
higher education
In your university degree, you will be assessed by
various methods. These are likely to include
written examinations. If you are an international
student, these may be quite different to the
examination or other assessment methods you
are used to. For instance, we do not usually have
oral exams (except on language courses), and
many exams require you to write essays rather
than short answers.

This page outlines some of the differences you
may find, and includes some exercises to help
you feel better prepared.

Read through the other pages in this guide on
Preparing for exams for more information on the
best way to prepare for exams in the UK.

Features of written exams in the UK
Most written exams in UK higher education have
some common features. Depending on the
academic culture you have previously studied in,
these may be different to what you are used to. It
will be helpful to know what may be different, so
you can see which practices you may need to
work on and develop.

* You will be expected to complete your answers
to strict time constraints - these may be much
shorter or much longer than you are used to.

* You may not have to answer all the questions
on the exam paper, or the same number of
questions in different sections - you will have to
check your instructions carefully.

* You will need to plan to use the time allowed to
allocate an equal amount of time to questions
with equal marks.

* You will usually not have access to textbooks or
other research material.

* You will usually not see the question paper in
advance, and questions from previous years will
not be reused.

* You will be expected to demonstrate how you
can put your knowledge to use - not just that you
have memorised the content of your lectures or
textbook.

* Unless the question is purely factual, you will
need to include critical analysis in your answers.

* You will not be expected to include detailed
references as you would in your coursework, but
you may wish to mention key theorists in your
topic.

* There are very few exams in which you can get
a mark of 100%, and this mark is not expected of
you. You may find it helpful to look at the mark
scheme in your course handbook or the Exams
Office guide (link in next section).

What you need to find out
It is really important to know that exams are not
all the same - even within the same subject, you
may have some exams where you are expected
to write essays and others where you are
expected to answer multiple choice questions. So
make sure you know what to expect by checking:

* How long the exam is and how many questions
you will have to answer.

* If you will need to answer a certain number of
questions from different sections (e.g. 'Answer
one question from Section A and all the questions
in Section B').

* If you can take any books into the exam room
(e.g. course texts, a dictionary, tables).

* If you can take a calculator into the exam room,
and if you need to have it verified by your
department before the exam.

It is also a good idea to make sure you know
where you need to go for each exam well in
advance: some of them may be in parts of the
university campus you have not yet visited.
If you are studying at the University of Reading, all the important information (including what to bring, how the timings work and where to find out what your seat number is) will be in the Examination Office's What You Need To Know guide.

Helping yourself to get better results

To get the best result in your examinations, you need to do more than just revise your subject knowledge. UK higher education exams are not a test of how much you can remember and recount from your lectures or your textbooks. Instead you will need to put your knowledge to use to say something interesting and meaningful about your subject. You also need to get used to doing this within the allowed time.

The most effective way to do this is to practise making answer plans and writing timed answers (by hand) for questions for your module on past exam papers.

You will be able to find past exam papers for your subject on the Exams Office webpage. These will not be the same questions that you are asked in your exam, but they will give you experience of how exam questions are worded. If you are taking a new module or course which does not have past papers available, ask your tutor if there are any practice questions.

* One of the most frequent complaints of markers is that the student did not answer the question. Paraphrasing it (re-writing it in your own words) can help you to make sure you have the right meaning. Try swapping answers with a friend to see how they rewrite the same question.

* Students for whom English is not their first language often worry about being penalised for poor English. The priority is to make sure the marker understands your meaning; keeping your sentences simple and planning your answer so that your ideas are clear will help with this. Proof-reading your work carefully will also help.

What to do if you're feeling anxious

Some students get extremely anxious whilst doing exams. It will help to feel prepared – the strategies in this and our other guides and video tutorials aim to help you to do that. If you are still anxious, and are worried that this will affect your performance, do discuss this with someone: your academic tutor, Welfare Officer, Study Adviser or University counsellor. The Chaplaincy and the Student Union also offer sessions at exam time to teach relaxation techniques - these are open to all students.

This guide reproduces the text of our LibGuide on Preparing for Exams. The online guide has links to additional information and can be found at:

https://libguides.reading.ac.uk/exams

For tips and guidance on other academic skills, see the Study Advice website at

www.reading.ac.uk/library/study-advice