Effective exam preparation

This guide will help you to prepare for exams and will suggest strategies you can use when sitting exams. The key to success in exams is preparation. Preparing for exams involves effort, effective time management and developing successful revision and exam strategies.

The purpose of exams

Exams are a focused way for your lecturers to find out what you know and understand about the topics covered on your course and for you to impress them with your knowledge. Written exams demonstrate that the answers you give are your own and not plagiarised. While you should be able to refer to researchers, theories or studies by name and date, you are not expected to write full reference lists or bibliographies.

Revision strategies

| Organise your notes | The sooner you start revision the better, and organising your notes after each lecture means you can jump straight in when it comes to preparing for an exam. Review your notes and handouts after each lecture to find any gaps and fill these in with your own research while the topic is still fresh in your mind. Remember to keep your notes simple, highlight key points and organise them logically so you can find the information easily when it comes to revising. Refer to the Note taking helpguide on Skills Plus for help developing effective note taking techniques. |
| Manage your time | Add exam dates to your calendar or diary as soon as they are available and create a revision timetable. You should plan revision time well in advance so you that you can cover all of the necessary topics (as a guide, start intense revision around 4 weeks prior to the exam), but be realistic and factor in any paid work or social activities. |
| Find the right study space | Some people study best at the library, while others are more successful at home – find the space that works best for you. Quiet places with little clutter can help you to avoid distractions – this often means leaving your room and switching off any mobile devices until you are finished with revision. |
| Revise actively | Revision should be an active process – it’s better to understand your notes than simply memorise them. You could use mind maps to simplify the information you need to learn and show the links between subjects – simple, visual approaches like this can help memory retention and are often more effective then revising information in full sentences or paragraphs. Try explaining key points to friends to make sure you understand the subject and can recall the required information without your notes. Refer to past exam papers to familiarise yourself with the type of topics covered, the format, pass marks and weighting of the questions. Practice answering the questions under exam conditions – this can help you to identify the subjects you need to revise more. |
Sitting the exam

The day before the exam:

- Make sure you know the exact location of the exam and how you will get there.
- Check bus or Metro timetables if using public transport and leave in plenty of time on the day.
- If you are travelling by car, make sure you factor in unexpected traffic!
- Make sure you have any necessary stationery, equipment or books (if an open-book exam) and pack your bag ready for the next day.

On the day of the exam:

- Arrive at the exam location in plenty of time.
- You may be nervous, so avoid discussing the exam with friends who may have revised differently, as this could cause you to panic!
- Have some tissues, water or snacks handy (if allowed) and store any prohibited belongings like mobile phones, tablets and books.
- Don’t attempt to revise any new material at this stage – if you have followed your revision timetable you will be prepared for the exam!

During the exam:

- When you’re allowed to begin, read any instructions or guidance carefully.
- Make sure you know how long you have to complete the exam.
- Consider the weighting of the questions as this will allow you to estimate how much time to spend on each answer.
- Check to see if you are required to answer all of the questions or if you choose from a list of options.
- Prioritise the question you are able to best answer – this will help you to get started and give the examiner a good impression of your work.
- Make a simple plan before starting each answer to help you structure your response logically – but don’t forget to cross out any plans or notes you don’t want to be marked on!

After the exam:

- Avoid discussing your answers with friends as this could cause unnecessary stress!
- Reflect on what you feel went well and where your revision strategies could be improved to help with future exams.

Personal tips

Being organised helps to avoid panic setting in. Remember to build in relaxation time to avoid becoming stressed and reward yourself to help you keep motivated. Eat and sleep well to keep healthy.

Seek professional advice from your lecturer, tutor or Student Support & Wellbeing if you feel you are becoming overstressed and it will impact on your exams.

Nearer, or immediately before exams, try to avoid situations that make you feel negative, including discussing the exam with those who tend to panic or those who are overconfident and make you feel nervous.
Useful reading


Helpguides

The following helpguides are available on [Skills Plus]:

- Mind mapping
- Note taking
- Time management

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**Ask4Help information and advice on or off campus 24x7**

Contact via your student portal at:
https://myportal.northumbria.ac.uk

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