



## **Surviving Exams**

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**This guide discusses some practical survival skills for exams. Taking exams is a skill, not a talent; doing well can have as much to do with technique as with preparation. The following may seem like common sense, but common sense can be the first thing to go when looking down the barrel of finals week.**

### **The Hours Before...**

#### **Make sure you have a good night's sleep**

This is the most important thing by far. If you are well rested, you will think more clearly, remember better, and will be more able to solve problems and think creatively. Don't pull an all-nighter; you'll be fuzzy, stressed and irritable. Being alert is your greatest asset.

#### **Arrive at the exam venue ahead of time**

Knowing where you need to be and arriving on time will allow you to remain calm and relaxed.

#### **Bring all the materials you need**

Pack your bag the night before. For an open book exam, bring your materials neatly organized; a jumble of notes isn't useful-effective organization (thematic, topic-based, chronological, etc.) is. Bring several pens in case one runs out in the midst of a brilliant thought!

#### **Avoid panic talk!**

For some perverse reason, many students seem to enjoy stressing each other out just before the exam. A suggestion: stand apart from the main group of students.

#### **Eat something**

Your stomach might be in knots and you feel you couldn't eat a thing. But if you don't eat, halfway through the exam you'll find yourself feeling tired and hungry, and losing concentration. Compromise: eat some easily digestible, solid food like rice, bread, savory biscuits or bananas. Keep coffee and chocolate to a minimum, as these will only give a short boost. What you need is staying power.

#### **Oh, and Study**

Of course, a major aspect of being prepared is studying.

## **Confidence is all . . .**

Confidence is a state of mind; calm, collected, and able to handle challenges. So, you've arrived at the exam with good preparation, a good night's sleep and having eaten something. You are on time, and have actively avoided panicky chitchat. What now?

### **Don't rush-relax**

The calmer, more relaxed you are, the more alert you'll be. Panic only gets in the way; if you are too nervous, you'll be too agitated to concentrate. On the other hand, if you are too casual, you won't be alert. The target is somewhere in the middle: the right amount of stress keeps you on your toes, helping you think clearly and effectively.

Focus on relaxing yourself:

- Take a few long, slow deep breaths
- As you slowly exhale, relax your shoulders, hands, face and jaw
- Stay quiet for a few moments, then go back to what you were doing, only more slowly and smoothly.

This technique is useful either before or during the exam.

### **Read the questions**

It is extremely important to understand the questions. Read carefully and slowly, and consider what you are being asked to do. Few questions require you to write everything you've ever read about a certain topic, so look for the clue words in the question. These will give you a strong indication of how they want you to answer the question.

### **Using Clue Words**

Underline the clue words in short answer and essay questions. Doing this will provide guidelines for answering when you return to the question later.

### **Getting a feel for the exam as a whole**

Read through the entire exam before you start. This gives you a feel for what you need to do and the time constraints involved. Another common sense-ism which cannot be overstated: Read the directions! There is nothing worse than getting to the end of the exam and suddenly realizing that you were supposed to answer two questions in Part A when you had instead written just one masterpiece. Exam writing is a game-you are being tested as much for your ability to follow directions as for your handling of the material itself.

### **Tackling the Questions**

During your initial read-through, locate the 'easy' and 'hard' questions. The golden rule is to start with the easy ones. Don't do the hard ones first to get them out of the way. What you'll find is that the hard ones get in your way, slowing you down and stressing you out. Answering an easy question increases your confidence, helps get you thinking and triggers your memory. This might help you to remember information for those 'difficult' questions.

## Speaking of Time . . .

### Time Management

As you read through the exam, look at how points are allocated. The number of points given to a particular question will give you an indication of how much time to spend on it. For example, in a 90-minute exam with 90 multiple-choice questions, you should average one question per minute. You may be able to answer some questions more quickly, buying extra time to devote to the trickier ones.

Use a similar system with essay answers. Look at the number of points per question, how they are distributed, how many questions you have to answer and ration your time accordingly. It may be helpful to make a note of how much time you should give to each question. Once you decide on your time outline, stick to it. Watch the clock, and once the allocated time has elapsed, stop there and move onto the next question.

If you haven't finished a question, leave lots of space in the exam booklet. Sometimes, you will answer the questions more quickly than the time allocated. If you have any extra time at the end (or during the revision period) you can return and answer it more fully.

Here's another tip: don't leave the exam early. If you have extra time, use it to revise or to think more deeply about one of the harder questions. Make use of all the allocated time-it's worth it.

## In the End . . .

Taking exams is an active process. You are there to think, assess, make judgments, and to concisely answer questions. Simple regurgitation will only get you so far.

### Remember the Golden Rules

- Get some sleep the night before
  - Eat something
  - Avoid talking to panicky people
  - Read the directions
  - Make a time management plan and stick to it
  - Watch the clock
  - Start with the easy ones
  - Build in revision time
  - Don't leave the exam early
  - Take control of your stress and make it work for you!
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