# Exam Preparation and Planning

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## 1. Foreword

University examinations take place in the first few weeks of the Summer term. These exams are designed to allow you to demonstrate the knowledge and understanding of a topic that you have developed over the preceding weeks/months/terms of a module. As such, exams represent the climax of a much longer process of learning. The purpose of this leaflet is to give you some hints, tips and information about how, and when, you might choose to prepare for your examinations – academically, mentally, practically and physically. The advice is arranged chronologically, both sides of the exam period. This leaflet does not cover the topic of revision, which is contained in a separate leaflet.

## 2. Before your exams

**Long before (1 year → 1 month)**

While you may choose not to start formal revision until closer to the exams, you should nevertheless start revision planning much earlier on. Better still is to view revision as an integral and ongoing part of learning, rather than an activity that starts after formal teaching has ended. For more information see ‘Effective Revision’ leaflet.

Exam timetables are published online at the end of the Spring term. Individual exams are listed by module code. Any clashes between your exams should be reported to the Examinations Office immediately. Use the timetable to create a revision schedule that helps you to ‘peak’ at the right time for each exam.

Old exam papers are a vital resource and are available online through the Templeman Library website. Past exam papers describe the structure, style, types of question and themes/topics you are likely to face. But always check with module convenors/tutors that exam formats are the same as previous years.
Long ago
As you prepare for your upcoming exams, reflect on, and learn from, your experience of past exams:

- How did you prepare?
- How did you get on?
- Was your performance good/bad or okay?
- What went well? What didn’t go so well?
- Do you want to repeat the past? Or would you benefit from doing things differently this time?

Soon before (1 month → 1 week)
The date you decide to start your focussed, intensive revision process depends in part upon when your exams fall, but good practice is always to start sooner rather than later. Putting revision off is seldom a good idea. For more information on how to plan an effective revision strategy, see separate ‘Effective Revision’ leaflet.

Double-check the exams timetable for venues/times closer to the exam dates as arrangements can change. And locate venues; don’t rely on being able to find the right room on the morning of the exam – find out in advance. Also check out the exam rules & regulations (either your departmental handbooks or ‘General Regulations for Students’) – what can you take in with you? What if you’re late? What if you’re sick?

Immediately Before (1 week → 10 minutes)
If you’ve revised properly, there will be no need to cram at the last minute. But if things have gone seriously wrong with your revision schedule (not necessarily your fault), it’s better to cram like mad the night before to scrape a pass than it is to fail a module.

Diet
Don’t prepare by consuming large quantities of caffeine and/or sugar. Energy drinks and strong coffee provide an energy rush or ‘high’, followed by a ‘crash’, when mental and physical performance falls off rapidly. Neither state is advisable in an examination where you will need to maintain a steady level of concentration for 2-3 hours. Your metabolism will be sufficiently stimulated by the challenge of the examination to not require additional stimulation. In addition, caffeine and sugar act as diuretics, leading to dehydration which will further impair exam performance, and leave you regularly needing the bathroom. Equally, starving yourself will not enhance your intellectual performance. Eat a light, balanced breakfast or lunch – brain food. And if pre-exam nerves mean you really can’t stomach much, a banana will provide a slow release of energy.

Make sure you attend to the practicalities. What exam equipment do you need – Pens? How many? A calculator? Tippex? And allow plenty of extra travel time. Getting stuck in a traffic jam, or your bus not turning up on time, are poor excuses for missing the start of an exam. Make sure you bring your student ID card to the exam. It has your exam number which you will need to find your
place on the exam room plan.

Wellbeing
When preparing for exams maintaining physical wellbeing is as important as mental preparation. An examination is physically as well as mentally demanding. Eat a balanced, healthy diet; limit alcohol intake; cut down on caffeine; sleep regularly; exercise regularly. Tiredness, poor nutrition and stimulants do not enhance intellectual performance.

Maintain your state of physical and mental wellbeing and carry this into the examination. Practice relaxation techniques, meditation or positive thinking. Whilst waiting to go in, mix with positive people, or spend quiet time on your own; avoid those who seem worried or scared as they can negatively affect your composure.

3. During your exams

Just before (10 → 0 minutes)
Make sure you’re sitting in the right seat (check your exam number), that you’re looking at the correct exam paper, and that you have everything you need for that particular exam – graph paper, list of formulae, cases, etc. Pay attention to the examiner’s instructions about what to do if or when you need to do it.

At start (0 → 10 minutes)
Don’t rush into the exam. Spend the first 10 minutes making sure you understand exactly what you need to do, and what you are going to do. Take time to read and understand the rubric:

- How many questions do you have to answer?
- From how many sections?
- What’s each part of the exam worth?

Read the whole exam paper carefully, highlighting or underlining key topic words and verbs. What is the question asking for? Mark those questions you feel you could answer well with a tick, those you could answer reasonably well with a question mark, and those you cannot answer with a cross. Now plan which questions to answer and the order you will tackle them. Finally, plan your time based on how much each section/answer is worth – not how much you know about each topic – allowing 10-20 minutes ‘free time’ at the end.

During (+10 → −10/20 minutes)
Most people start on their easiest question/section first. This gets you off to a confident start, and may allow extra time for more difficult questions later on. Don’t start writing straight away though; scribble down a quick essay plan or spider-diagram showing the main points you intend to cover in order to answer the question. This will keep you on track and help you to monitor time, making sure that your effort matches the value of each part of the exam. Remember, each question – or part of a question – is allocated a specific number of marks; you can’t get more marks by answering in greater detail than asked for. And stick to time; if you start to overrun on a question quickly jot down the ideas you need to finish it, then move on to the next question. You can then come back and complete it at the end of the exam.
Exams are an endurance event, not a sprint:

- Pace yourself
- Pause to rest – to rest/flex your writing-hand, to close your eyes, to stretch
- Pause to think – to ask yourself, ‘Am I still answering the question?’

Target your writing. Examiners only give marks for answers to the question asked – not for you demonstrating everything you know about a topic. Keep your paper tidy and legible, with any scored-through writing, or additions or insertions, neatly and clearly done. Even the greatest answer is worthless if the examiner can’t decipher it.

**At end (−10/20 → 0 minutes)**

Make sure all questions have been attempted. Incomplete/partial answers can pick up valuable extra marks that can make the difference between success and failure – between one grade and the next. Go back and finish incomplete answers where you overran on time earlier in the exam. A few extra lines wrapping an answer up can pick up crucial marks.

Read over everything you’ve written, making any corrections/deletions/additions as appropriate. Finally, make sure your answer numbering is accurate and that any jumps, continuations or insertions are clearly signposted to the examiner.

4. **After your exams**

**Immediately after (1 minute → 1 day)**

Don’t conduct a post-mortem, especially if another exam is imminent. Fretting about what you did or didn’t get right, or comparing your answers with others can lead to panic, and distract you from preparing for your next exam. Instead, reward yourself in some way; something symbolic rather than extravagant. If possible take a short break from exam preparation – a day, an afternoon, a couple of hours, depending on your schedule. Take time to clear your mind and move on to the next exam. Save any big (or boozy) celebrations until after you’ve finished your last exam.

**Soon after (3.2) 1 day → Next Exam**

Resume revision soon after each exam and make sure you maintain routines in terms of sleep, nutrition and exercise. Remember, you might well need to need to maintain your energy and concentration levels over a month of more. At the same time, reflect on your exam experience so far; should you – and can you – alter anything in time for your next exam? Could you have prepared more effectively? Was there something that didn’t work so well for you? In either case, is it something you can usefully change without upsetting your revision and exam preparation?
Long after (Last exam → 1 year)

While it might seem tempting to push your exams from your mind for another year once they’re over, it’s far better to invest some time thinking about your performance – to use the exams as a valuable learning experience.

So, evaluate performance while the exams are still fresh in your memory, comparing your expectations to our actual results:

- Were your results better, or worse, or about what you expected?
- Was your experience of the exams reflected in your results?
- Were your expectations realistic? (based on the time you spent preparing)

Regardless of your results, focus on the exams as a positive learning experience. Ask yourself:

- What worked well?
- Why did this work well?
- What am I going to do in future as a result of this working well
- What worked least well for me?
- Why didn’t this work for me?
- What do I plan to do differently next time?

5. Further reading


Race, P. (2003), How to study: practical tips for students, Oxford, Blackwell