

What not to write!

- X 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.**
- X 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.
- X Don't use text speak or colloquialisms.
- X Never say "I think" or "in my opinion". Instead have ideas that are supported or opposed by your evidence.
- X 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.

It may be more beneficial to **relax and rest between exams**, than cramming in last minute revision for the next one.

For more information, see....

Preparing for exams 1. Planning your revision.

Preparing for exams 2. Improve your memory.

For more on this and other aspects of academic study, see our website at www.rdg.ac.uk/studyadvice

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Writing exam answers

Preparing for exams 3



This guide includes advice on:

- Selecting questions
- Managing your time
- Planning your answers

This guide is an introduction to the advice available. For more detailed advice on Preparing for Exams, see the Study Advice website

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. However if you are still anxious, and are worried that this will affect your performance, do come and discuss this with a Study Adviser or a university counsellor. **See www.rdg.ac.uk/studyadvice for details of how to arrange a confidential session.**

The night before

Be prepared – 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, student card etc).

Tips to help you sleep - Stop revising 90 mins before preparing for bed.

- Relax with friends, music, book, TV etc.
- Have a warm bath or shower and/or use a relaxation exercise.
- If your head's still whirring with thoughts in the middle of the night, have a notebook by your bed and write them down.

In the exam room

Read the instructions carefully – Before looking at the actual questions, read the rubric (instructions). Are there compulsory questions? Marks are often lost by nervous or over-confident students who overlook instructions to “Answer 1 question from Section A, and 2 from Section B” or tackle too few questions.

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 = 10 minutes planning, 35 minutes writing. Allow checking time for statistics or calculations.

Read the questions carefully. Read through the paper once 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? Do not answer a question that you do not understand.

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.

Answering each question to gain most 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.

Demonstrate that you are answering the question - 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 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 year of their major works. You do not need to give page numbers or lengthy quotes, except in open book exams. You do not need a reference list.

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 – what happens next? If you have to remember formulae, try associating them with pictures or music while revising. If you really can’t progress with this answer, leave a gap. It will probably come back to you once you are less anxious.

See guide 2 in this series on **Improving your Memory** for more tips on memory.

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.

