



# Writing Exams

## Strategies for ALL exams

Exams in College are often worth a lot of marks, so it is worthwhile to make sure that you are mentally and physically prepared. Make sure that you arrive early enough so that you don't feel rushed. At the same time, avoid standing around with tense students who are studying at the last moment or asking "how much did you study?"

It is important to develop a consistent routine for beginning an exam. For example, you may want to take a minute to apply relaxation techniques such as deep breathing or a body scan (see the brochure on stress reduction). Next, consciously and carefully read the directions, even if they are similar to previous exams that you've written for the instructor. You should next survey the test and evaluate the importance of each section, which will allow you to plan the order that you do the questions in and how much time to spend on each section. Finally, you might wish to write down formulas or any other key information that you might forget during the exam.

During the exam, if you feel panicky, apply relaxation techniques and focus on the task at hand, rather than thinking about the potential consequences of doing poorly or well. You should pace yourself in order to leave time for more valuable questions and for checking your answers. For that, you should be in the habit of checking the time every ten or fifteen minutes (not every minute!). In general, answer the easier questions first, since this may prompt recall for more difficult questions. If you are writing on lined paper (rather than the exam itself), write on one side of the page only to make it easier for the instructor to read and to leave room for inserting additional answers afterwards. In any case, leave space between questions so that you can add more information.

Finally, remain in the exam room until the end of the allotted time. Given the value of the exam, working for an extra fifteen minutes or a half hour will probably be valuable time spent.



# Effective Strategies

Okay, so you've hopefully used effective strategies to study and prepare for your exams. So far, so good, but it may surprise you to learn that there are many strategies for effectively writing exams. Some of the strategies are for all exams and some are for specific exam formats. We'll cover both here.

## Strategies for Multiple Choice Exams

Many students feel like multiple choice exams are tricky and have "traps" in them. Often, that is because students underprepare for them, thinking that the answers will be in front of them. Even with good preparation, however, it is important to use proper techniques to avoid becoming confused.

- Be particularly careful about pacing—if there are, for example, 60 questions in a one hour exam, you need to make sure that you complete one question per minute on average. If you spend five minutes on one question, you have lost four minutes!
- Cover up the answers before reading the question.
- Read the question carefully. You may need to process the question using such techniques as underlining key words or making a quick diagram. It is always useful to try to put the question into your own words as you are reading.
- Predict an answer, if possible.
- Evaluate each of the choices on how well they match your prediction.
- If you are uncertain about a choice, mark it with a question mark and move to the other choices. The answer may become clearer, either because one of the other choices matches your prediction well or because you are able to eliminate the other choices.
- Mark questions that you are uncertain about and come back to them. Alternatively, if spending more time on the question won't help, guess among the choices that you've not eliminated. Be aware though of any penalty for guessing—some instructors will take away marks for incorrect answers as a means of discouraging guessing.

- Despite the common notion that you should never change your answer on a multiple choice exam, research consistently shows that students more often change from wrong to right than vice-versa. Change your answer if you have good reason to.

## Strategies for Essay Exams

It is not uncommon for students to feel anxious about this format as well. Nevertheless, essay exams provide perhaps the greatest opportunity for you to demonstrate what you have learned.

- If you are given a choice of questions to answer, make a few notes for each question before deciding which to answer. Sometimes, it is not apparent at first glance which question you will have the most to say about.
- Form a brief outline before writing, including a thesis statement and supporting statements for the thesis. Despite the time pressure that you may feel, you are better off mapping out what you are going to say.
- Provide clear structure. This includes an introductory paragraph, supporting paragraphs, a conclusion, and clear transitions between ideas.
- Get to the point. Your instructor may well be tired after reading a number of handwritten essay exams and will likely appreciate directness.
- Try as much as possible to write legibly, ideally double-spaced.
- Make sure that you are answering the question, rather than just writing down everything that you can recall on the topic. For example, if the question calls for you to contrast two things, you need to actually describe how they are different.