
Plan to Answer your Exam Questions

"I know the material but I can't figure out how to answer the question!" – most students, sometimes

We know you have studied, so here are a few ideas on how to get that material down on the exam paper when you are under the stress of writing with limited time.

Read All Questions Carefully! Manage Your Time!

Short Answer Questions

Your instructor is looking for a brief and descriptive answer.

- Allocate your time according to the proportion of marks each question is worth.
- Use questions that ask for definitions or explanations to inform the longer, more explanatory part of your answer. Don't repeat the information you give in one part of the question in the other.
- If a question that asks you to "explain", imagine you are telling a friend about the topic.
- If you have questions which are a mix of short and essay answers, check the rubric carefully so you don't miss answering part of the question.

Essay Questions

Essay questions ask you to discuss and expand on a topic and are usually several paragraphs long.

- 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.
- If a question asks you to "briefly comment", treat it as a mini-essay – have a sentence or two to introduce your topic; select a few points to discuss with a sentence or two about each; add a concluding sentence that sums up your overall view.

Make a Plan!

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.

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 summarize to show how it answers the question. Short paragraphs with one or two pieces of evidence are sufficient. In your conclusion summarize the arguments to answer the question.

What to do if your mind goes blank?

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.

Good Luck!

