

# 7: Examination Skills

## Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide you with skills in order to complete examinations successfully. You will be shown how to devise strategies for reviewing material, developing a revision timeline and also learn to identify the areas of study on which you should concentrate. You will also be given helpful tips on reviewing and learn how to use past examinations as a guide for future ones.

## Outcomes

By the end of your study of this chapter you should be able to:

- Devise a revision strategy.
- Manage your time effectively during revision and examination.
- Identify specific areas of study.
- Practice sample examinations or tests.
- Avoid unacceptable examination practices.
- Follow examination instructions.
- Recognize the precise requirements of the examination or test.

## Initial Preparation

The most important thing any student can do to prepare for an examination is to start studying early. Even if you got distinctions at MSCE (“O” level) with little effort you will discover that such an approach is not going to work at College level. College courses contain a lot more content and require far more effort to prepare for the examination. *Daily* preparation is crucial. Preparation for examinations should be seen as part of your daily study routine. Earlier in the Study Skills chapter it was recommended that you should spend 2-3 hours outside of class studying for every hour of class time. For a straightforward lecture course try the following:

- Every day before class preview the material for 15-20 minutes.
- Attend every lecture. Seems simple but missing classes is the biggest mistake you might make.
- Take good notes. (Review the Study Skills & Listening Skills chapters for advice on how best to do this.)
- Spend another 20-30 minutes after class going over the notes.
- Use this time to get any confusing points cleared up in your head; much better now than later. This will make preparation for examinations much easier closer to the time.
- Once a week, review the material to get a more complete overview of the information.

# Preparing a Study Schedule

If you've been doing the activities described above on a daily and weekly basis you will be in good shape when it comes time to get serious about preparing for a specific examination. The first thing you will need is an examination study plan or schedule. You need to answer some questions:

- What is my schedule like during the week of the exam?
- Do I have other exams or papers due?
- Will I have all week to prepare or will I have to study over the weekend?
- How many pages of notes are there?
- How many chapters do I have to read?

All of these questions will help you answer one basic one: How much time will I need? For a single examination identify the day one week before the examination. That's the first day to start studying in earnest. Literally plan out how many hours you will spend each day studying until the exam. Make a schedule and stick to it. Be sure to leave time for group study or review sessions. Also break up the material into parts and cover a little each day. Consider these questions:

- How much material will I cover each night?
- How much time will I spend studying with a friend?
- When are the review sessions?
- Will the Prof. or lecturer be available to answer any questions that come up?

## Study Methods

Once you have a study schedule it's time to get to work. There is no one way to go about this. Remember it is important to come up with a system that works for you. Below is a suggested plan of action.



### **Seminar Activity: Study Steps**

In your seminar groups work through the five steps and additional tips below. Discuss their effectiveness as a way of preparing for your examinations. How might you adapt them?

#### **Step 1**

Get a blank piece of paper and list the material you need to study. Start with big topics and leave room for subtopics. Fill in the information as best as you can. Get another sheet of paper and start over if necessary. Once you see all the units of information in front of you it will be easier to organize your study plan.

## ***Step 2***

Do this step alone in your quiet study place. Read through each unit and paraphrase the content into smaller sections. Break the study material into smaller chunks and study each one. This is when you start to memorize the information you'll need later. Write down any questions that you may have.

## ***Step 3***

The next step is to work with someone else to clarify anything that is confusing. Work with another person. Go to review sessions, see a lecturer, work with the professor or with one of your peers. It is important to make sure that everything is clearly understood. This is crucial because if this step is skipped you're left memorizing facts that have no real meaning to you. Not only is this information difficult to memorise but you will also easily forget it later. No real learning would have taken place.

Try working with someone else who will ask you questions about the material. If you can answer and explain concepts without too much effort then you're in good shape. Usually this helps to expose areas that require more attention and study.

## ***Step 4***

Now it's time to put the information into your brain for retrieval. If you've been working all along you will already remember much of it. Make sure nothing is left out. Also try to use as many senses as you can. Employ touch by writing out key points, auditory stimulation by reading your notes out aloud, visual stimulation by reviewing your notes etc.

## ***Step 5***

If the previous step went well then all you have left is to work on weak areas and a general overview of the material. If you didn't do well explaining the material you'll need another round of steps 3 and 4. Make sure you leave time for this in your study schedule.

If you planned well and kept up with the work there should be little anxiety the night before an exam. If you started late or waited to get questions answered then you'll be busy the night before. This will add extra stress and you'll likely make stupid errors on the exam. At the very least you'll be more susceptible to getting sick which will worsen your situation. The only thing that should be going through your mind the night before is a sense of confidence. It's ok to be a little afraid or anxious but not panicky.

Below are listed some other study suggestions.

## ***Other tips***

- Use flashcards: These help to memorize facts but not understanding

- Work in groups: Groups work well when you need to work through difficult material: Quiz each other for understanding.
- Review sessions: Only go to early ones, last minute reviews sometimes cause needless confusion.
- Make use of your lecturers and tutors: Employ their help early. Waiting till the last minute only fosters aggravation and panic.

## Past Examination Papers

Using past examination papers is very useful strategy for your revision programme. Past examination papers allow you to test your knowledge, in depth on real degree questions. Trying to answer these degree questions can identify areas of weakness allowing you to revise areas you may otherwise have overlooked.

Past examination papers will give a good indication of the level of difficulty you're likely to experience in the actual examination. Often you will also see that in different years the papers revolve around specific key points and themes. Make sure you revise these areas thoroughly but do not 'spot' or focus exclusively on the materials covered in previous papers. This could be disastrous as examiners love to change the focus from year to year.



### Seminar Activity: Success Strategies

In your seminar group answer the following question:

- When did you each last take an examination?
- What kind of examination was it?
- How did you feel about it?
- Were you successful?
- Explore with the group the factors that contributed to each of your successes and failures. List the factors that contributed to success.



### Self Study Activity: A Revision Time Table

Use a blank timetable and prepare your own study schedule for a set of examinations in six weeks time. It should include the following:

- A selection of the key topics you will need to revise in each subject area to get an overall sense of the volume of work.
- An assessment of how much time you will need to spend on each topic based on familiarity with the subject matter, frequency of questions on past exam papers and the skills to practice.

- c) An estimation, based on how much needs to be covered, of how much time you will need to study each day.
- d) A scheduled time to study each day. You can be somewhat flexible here, but generally you should try to study every day and where possible at the same time every day.
- e) Include scheduled time for leisure activities and rest.

## Examination Day

### Dealing with Anxiety

You all feel some degree of anxiety upon discovering that you will be taking an examination. How could you not? Having someone other than your lecturer to invigilate is a scary notion. You should begin your examinations by addressing your anxiety.



### Seminar Activity: Test Day Tips

As a group discuss the following *Test-Day Tips*. Not everyone may need additional support in this area but it is worthwhile spending some time familiarising yourself with these stress reducing strategies.

#### ***Test-Day Tips***

- a) Relax and get a good night's sleep the night before.
- b) Prepare yourself the night before. Organize pencils, pens, a calculator, a bottle of water and earplugs. Earplugs are great if you are easily distracted by noise.
- c) Eat breakfast. It is essential for the energy you'll need for the test.
- d) Give yourself plenty of time to arrive calmly at the testing centre. If you arrive 30 minutes early, a brisk walk around the site can clear your mind and energize you.
- e) Sit down on a bench and take some deep breaths.
- f) Do not study on the testing day!
- g) Don't panic if you seem to forget something. It's normal when you are nervous. It'll come to you in the test.
- h) When the test is given to you, write down on an extra sheet of paper, any math formulas, measurements or things you've needed to memorize. This will free up your mind.
- i) Try to pace yourself. Put your watch on the desk in front of you and be aware of the time.
- j) If you don't know a question, skip it and come back to it later. Complete all the things you know first and return to the harder questions.
- k) After the test, let it go. Stop thinking about it and do something to reward yourself.

## Examination Instructions

Every test or examination has instructions. These are usually printed on the examination cover sheet. It is very important that you study them in detail before you start writing. They inform you about how much time you have to complete the examination. They also outline any choices you might have to make in terms of questions. Occasionally, it is not necessary to answer everything on the question paper so make sure you know what options are available. Also if the paper is going to be marked by different people you might also have different answer booklets so make sure you are aware of what sections need to be answered in which booklet.

Allow yourself plenty of time to familiarise yourself with these instructions.

## **Examination Questions**

When you look at an examination question read it more than once so you are absolutely clear about what is required. Identify the scope of the question, how much detail will the answer require? In the question look for clues. Are there dates, locations or other parameters that outlines the scope required? For an additional clue also check the mark allocation for that question. Make sure that you allocate the appropriate amount of time for the appropriate number of possible marks. For example, don't write an answer that is pages in length when only a few marks are at stake.

For the important questions, before you put pen to paper, spend a few minutes developing a small plan or outline to your answer. This way you can create a structured answer that covers all the information you have learned in a logical and sequential manner. This will demonstrate full understanding and impress the markers. It is very poor to write down random thoughts onto the paper as they come to mind.



### **Seminar Activity: The Examination Paper**

Work in pairs, study a past examination paper and discuss how to interpret the instructions and examination questions. Respond to these questions:

- a) How much time should you spend reading the questions?
- b) In which order should you answer the questions?
- c) What do you do if you cannot answer a question?
- d) How will you monitor the time?
- e) Why is timing so important?
- f) In an essay question, do you work from an outline?
- g) Should you allot time to read through your answers?

Discuss the responses with the group and list effective strategies. Write down suggestions that may be useful.

# Summary

In this module you have gone through a process that you would follow before you take examinations and during examinations. During preparation for examinations you are expected to do the following: devise a revision strategy, manage your time during revision and examination, recognize the precise requirements of the examination or test, identify areas of study you need to work on and practice answering sample examinations or tests. You have learnt that during the examinations you have to follow examination instructions and avoid unacceptable examination practices.

## Additional Enrichment Resources

The following web resources are recommended and will offer enrichment on examination methods:

Resource	Location
<b>CampusAccess.com</b> , Exam Preparation Tips	<a href="http://www.campusaccess.com/student-life/academics-exam-preparation.html">http://www.campusaccess.com/student-life/academics-exam-preparation.html</a>
<b>WikiHow</b> , How to Write Flash Cards	<a href="http://www.wikihow.com/Write-Flash-Cards">http://www.wikihow.com/Write-Flash-Cards</a>
<b>Using English</b> , 28 Top Tips for Exams and Tests	<a href="http://www.usingenglish.com/resources/exam-tips.html">http://www.usingenglish.com/resources/exam-tips.html</a>
<b>VUMA! Portal</b> , Exam Preparation	<a href="http://www.vuma.ac.za/drupal/?q=content/exam-preparation-1">http://www.vuma.ac.za/drupal/?q=content/exam-preparation-1</a>
<b>VUMA! Portal</b> , How to avoid going over an Essay Word Limit	<a href="http://www.vuma.ac.za/drupal/?q=content/how-avoid-going-over-essay-word-limit">http://www.vuma.ac.za/drupal/?q=content/how-avoid-going-over-essay-word-limit</a>
<b>VUMA! Portal</b> , Top Tips For Passing Exams	<a href="http://www.vuma.ac.za/drupal/?q=content/top-tip-passing-exams">http://www.vuma.ac.za/drupal/?q=content/top-tip-passing-exams</a>



## Glossary

These words and terms are used in this chapter.

Term	Definition
Factoids	a small and often unimportant bit of information
Retrieve	to save something from being lost, damaged, or destroyed
Aggregation	collected together from different sources and considered as a whole
Scary	causing fear or alarm
Clue	Hint or an explanation or reason for something that is difficult to understand