

Examinations

What is Being Assessed?

Every examination answer should demonstrate:

1. Breadth of knowledge and understanding
2. Systematic thinking: the ability to order one's knowledge into a logical, coherent form
3. Relevance to the question: the inclusion of all that is fundamental and the exclusion of anything that is irrelevant to the question which has been asked
4. Wider reading will normally mean a greater breadth of knowledge, and credit will be given to students who can demonstrate that their reading includes both primary and secondary sources.

Interpretation and Argument

University students are expected to understand the issues of interpreting the evidence from primary sources.

1. Interpretation: At the university level one rarely encounters questions that are exclusively factual. Increasingly you should find yourself compelled to grapple with questions that involve problems of interpretation. Such questions will make heavier demands upon your ability to order your material, to use it in constructing a convincing argument, and to draw it to a satisfactory conclusion. In such instances there is commonly no 'correct' answer, although much of the material that you use will still be subject to the test of factual correctness.

You should demonstrate knowledge of the interpretations of secondary sources, the ability to discriminate between facts of greater and lesser importance, and the ability to analyse significance.

2. Construction of argument: The same skills will also be required in areas where knowledge of historical facts is limited and where scholars have been obliged to resort to hypothetical reconstruction and conjecture. Here too there will normally be no 'correct' answer. Instead you will be judged for your knowledge of the different theories offered as explanations, and for your skill in arguing whatever theory seems most convincing to you. In these circumstances two widely divergent answers may deservedly secure equal marks.

Use your knowledge to construct an answer to the question. A clear thesis or overall interpretation should be presented in your introduction. The body of the answer should build a strong, logical case for your thesis, backed up by examples from the primary evidence. Show knowledge of key words or terms where applicable. Identify relevant relationships and connections in your evidence. Consider plausible alternative interpretations and indicate why you discount these. Conclude with a strong statement regarding having demonstrated your thesis.

3. Evidence as the basis of argument: Remember that your arguments must always be founded on as firm a basis as possible. Cunningly contrived theories are of little value if they do not include examples from the available evidence.
4. Clarity: Clear writing is a result of clear thinking. If we have to guess at your meaning, you have not convinced us of your grasp of the question and of your response. Cogency and lucidity of prose count.

Preparation

- **Don't leave all your studying until the end of the year!** Regular reading and revision should be a part of your routine programme.
- **Begin your final revision by making a timetable for the work to be covered.** This helps to ensure you spread your time evenly over the material you need to study.
- **Make sure you know the format of the exam for which you are preparing.** Check the examination scripts from previous years. If in doubt ask the lecturer.
- **What to revise?** Normally you should start with your lecture and tutorial notes, your textbooks, and then move on to wider reading (which you should already have notes on).
- **Remembering what you read:** When revising your lecture notes, textbooks or other reading, you must make sure that you are taking in what you are reading, sifting out the main points, and helping your brain to store them. Anything you can do to make your reading more active will help you. The best way of making sure you have grasped the main points of a lecture or whatever is by writing those points out as briefly as possible: you should aim at having a clear idea in your head, and on paper, of what you got out of your reading.
- **Plan ahead exactly how much time you need to spend on each question in the exam.** You will need to allocate time in accordance with the marks given to each; in most cases, each question will carry an equal weight, and your time should be divided equally between the questions.
- **Go over past exam papers.** One of the most practical things you can do to prepare yourself for your exam is to go over past exam papers for the subject. Look at the kinds of questions that are usually asked about each topic. Set yourself a question from a past paper, and try to do it in the time limit allowed in the exam. Take careful note of what is being asked of you in the question: be sure you know the difference between questions which ask you to 'discuss', 'analyse', or 'compare'. Do make sure, however, that you have listened carefully to what is happening in this year's exam: exam formats can and do change from year to year.
- **Maintain your health.** As the exam day nears, pay particular attention to maintaining your health. Eat, sleep, and exercise regularly; you will study more effectively and think more clearly. Exhaustion will cause you to write a poor exam regardless of how much material you've prepared.

In the Examination

Writing exams is a skill like any other; it is a skill you can learn and keep improving. These are a few guidelines to help you in the exam room.

Timing

- This is perhaps the easiest exam skill to master, and yet the most damaging to ignore.
- Stick **RESOLUTELY** to the timing you have planned. You cannot make one answer so good that its mark will compensate for the time that you have taken from your other questions.
- Read through the entire exam at the outset. Plan to spend a few minutes at the beginning of the exam to read through the questions and choose which ones you will answer.

- Be constantly aware of how your answer is progressing. Keep reassessing the plan you made for your answer in the light of how many points you have actually written about, and how much time you still have. With five minutes to go (on your planned timing), you should be starting on your conclusion.
- Allow time for reading through your answers. You may save yourself from some horrible slips.
- Read the instructions to candidates and ALWAYS attempt as many questions as are required. Spending extra time on two questions and not answering a third will NEVER be an efficient way of scoring marks.
- If you find yourself nearing the end of the time you have allotted yourself for a question, and you still have vital material to write, put down your final points in note form. This tactic is only worthwhile in the case of dire emergency: your notes will not be given the same credit as normal prose, but they will count for something. If your time is up on any question except the last, leave space for any extra material that you wish to add later.

Choosing your questions

- Read each question carefully to ensure that you have understood it. It helps to underline the key words to focus your thoughts. (Again, consider whether you are being asked to 'discuss', 'analyse', 'comment on', 'contrast' etc.) Note carefully any dates and geographical regions that will define the time period and places you are to write about.

Planning your answers

- Before starting to write, spend a brief period planning your answer. Four or five minutes devoted to this task are minutes well spent. At minimum, jot down key points of your argument and evidence. Most people find it useful to write a rough outline prior to the actual writing of an answer; this should be crossed out upon completing the examination. You should at least formulate an outline in your head before endeavouring to answer any question.
- Consider the question carefully, and include ONLY points relevant to the question asked. Material that is irrelevant to the question, however accurate or important, will not be given credit.

Writing

There is no need to write out the question, unless you find that in so doing you secure a better understanding of its meaning.

- Write in full sentences. Your answer should be written in prose. Bullet points, lists of points, outlines and sentence fragments are not acceptable.
- Points for later essays that occur to you while still writing earlier ones can be jotted down on a spare page (the last is good for this). These notes should also be crossed out before the conclusion of the examination.
- Leave at least one full page between answers. You may remember some important points after completing an answer and wish to add them. Some students find that leaving a blank line between each line of text also helps.
- Legibility is very important. The student who hands in a script that is difficult to read runs a serious risk. Make sure your pen is suitable: felt pens that show through the page and blotchy ballpoints should be avoided. Take more than one pen into the exam with you. No ink equals no marks.

- You should not have to cross out more than a sentence at a time; if you find you are abandoning whole paragraphs, pause to review your outline. Large deletions are a sign of poor time management.
- Avoid abbreviations (couldn't, won't, 2nd C, etc.), except for conventional forms such as e.g., i.e., etc. You should also avoid colloquial expressions (e.g. wimped out, scored points).

Exam anxiety

A bit of adrenalin in the system is probably not such a bad thing; however, exam nerves can make it difficult for you to settle down to writing.

- **Careful preparation** is the best way to give yourself confidence.
- **Taking some deep, slow breaths** while you are waiting for everything to begin often helps calm your initial nerves.
- **Marking up the exam questions** by underlining key words may help ward off the anxiety when first looking for questions to answer.
- **Answer a question you feel confident of first.** By the time you come to the others, you will have gained some more confidence in yourself.
- **If you suspect you have a serious problem,** go to Student Counselling before the exam period. While most people experience some exam anxiety, a few people suffer from anxiety that is really debilitating.