

# What Can I Do to Prepare For Exams?



## Strategies For Maximizing Your Exam Success

**Student Learning Development  
University of Otago**

**This booklet is an introduction to some of the skills and strategies that will help you successfully complete your studies at Otago.**

Based on an original booklet developed by Jacques van der Meer and Lee Adam for HEDC Student Learning Development at the University of Otago.

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## Introduction

The best way to prepare for exams is to start early, to plan your revision, and to use sound learning strategies.

As exams move closer, you should prioritise your time. This means deciding how much time to allocate to subjects or topics.

## Planning and prioritising

Factors you might take into account when planning your priorities include:

- The relative weight of the exam in the overall assessment of the paper
- The level of difficulty of the content for you
- The timing of the exam

## Make a time plan

- Use the time planner in this resource to map out your study intentions and plan for success.
- Make a note of your exam dates and times – you will need to consider these when you make your study plan.
- Allocate study time on the basis of how much the exam is worth versus the internal assessment component. You will need to spend more time studying for an exam that is worth 60% of your final grade than you will for an exam worth 20% of your final grade.
- Make your study time plan as specific as possible by breaking papers into themes or topics so you know exactly what you will be studying and when. This will also allow you to plan to cover everything you need to know.
- If you are finding one paper harder than the others, plan to spend more time preparing for that exam.
- Remember your time plan needs to be flexible as your priorities might change. For example, you may find you need to spend more time studying for a specific paper than you originally thought.

There are many different formats or approaches you can use for making a time plan. You could use your diary or the calendar function on your computer, or you could use a time plan sheet like the one on our website <http://www.otago.ac.nz/hedc/otago615370.pdf> to provide you with an overview of the whole week.

## Types of exams

Exams are types of tests, and you should make sure you understand

- What kind of test you will be doing?
- What emphasis the test will have?

Below are some examples of different types of tests and their emphasis. You should note that all tests require understanding and reasoning, even though the type of response they call for may vary.

Basic Test Types	Emphasis
MCQ (Multi-choice)/ True/False	Recognition, Recall, Understanding
SAQ (short answer questions)	Recall, understanding
Essay (long answer)	Understanding, interpretations, analysis, evaluation

## Some general exam strategies

- In preparing for these different types of tests you may find it helpful to employ the following general strategies:
- Read any stated objectives or outcomes you have been given. These will help you to see what is important in the paper.
- Read your course materials (ie hand-outs, readings etc) and your lecture notes carefully.
- Review your own notes and fill in any ideas or information that is obviously missing.
- Write down what you consider to be the main themes, central ideas, and concepts of the paper.

Test your understanding of these, and elaborate on that understanding by:

- ✓ Clarifying the meaning of difficult or important parts of the paper.
- ✓ Adding more detail where you think it appropriate.
- ✓ Clarifying relationships between ideas and concepts.

Your aim should be to see how main ideas and concepts relate to each other, and how they are used to support particular subjects or themes. Mapping and charting can help this process which is sometimes referred to as relational understanding. It can help you to visualise course content, to see the “big picture”, and to identify patterns and relationships. Relational understanding helps in the preparation for all types of tests.

## Multiple choice tests

Multiple choice tests are intended to be objective and reliable. In learning for a multi-choice test it is important to learn for understanding, as well as for recall.

A multi-choice test may require you to:

- Recognise the answer to a problem.
- Recognise the correct reason for a relationship.
- Establish causal links.
- Demonstrate an understanding of principles or rules.

When doing a multi-choice test, make sure you read the instructions and questions carefully. Consider the following:

- Is the question asking for
  - The only correct answer?
  - Two or more correct answers?
  - The best answer?
  - The incorrect alternative?
- Identify questions you can answer easily. Answer these first.
- Look for, and underline, any distinguishing words or phrases, especially those that are linked to specific sections of the paper.
- Convert any double negatives to positives.
- Read the options in conjunction with the question.
- Recall what you have learned. Look for the correct/best option.
- Allocate your time carefully, especially if some questions or sections are worth more than others.
- Pace yourself through the exam.
- Change answers only if you have a strong feeling that your first response was wrong.

## Short answer tests

These tests are most often used to test knowledge and understanding of definitions, formulae, principles and explanations. They are often used to cover a wide range of content. Usually, short answer tests can be answered succinctly. When approaching the short answer test, look for key words in the question.

For example:

- |           |  |
|-----------|--|
| - Define  | Give clear, precise meanings   |
| - List    | Write an itemized set of accurate and concise statements or formulae |
| - State   | Write down main points, or describe a principle or concept           |
| - Explain | Clarify the meaning of a statement or questions                      |
| - Diagram | Provide a plan, chart, or table of some kind                         |

Remember:

- You should allocate your time very carefully for a short answer test.
- You can usually use dot points where appropriate in this kind of test.
- You should also be prepared to apply what you know to new situations.

## Essay type questions

There can be considerable subject variation in the requirements for exam essay writing. In general, however, essay type questions test understanding (of themes, ideas, concepts), and the ability to interpret, analyse, and evaluate information. In preparing for this type of test, you must make sure that you understand the ideas, concepts, and theories set out in the course.

Your preparation can be assisted by:

- Discussion with peers
- Drafting responses to possible questions
- Feedback on any internal assessment.

As in all exams you should read the question most carefully:

- Look for key words or phrases that will tell you what is expected in your answer.
- Make sure you do not write for too long on one question. If you do, you will be under time on another, and risk losing more marks than you will gain.
- Begin with the questions you find easiest, and which deal with the material you know best.
- If you run out of time use bullet points to indicate how you would have completed your answer.

## Additional strategies

### *Link up with a friend:*

Studying in a group, or setting mutual study goals and discussing key concepts and ideas with a friend may be helpful. It can also help you to stay motivated and to keep you on track.

### *Make use of past examination papers:*

If possible, get hold of some past papers and work through them to get an idea of the kinds of questions asked and what is expected of you. Note, however, that the style and format of exams often change, so check with your lecturer about what is required.

Copies of past exam papers are available for viewing and printing from the Library website: <http://www.otago.ac.nz/library/exams/>  
Copies are also held in the library if you wish to access them in person.

## Further information

For information about exam timetables and venues, recounts, alternative arrangements in the case of illness or disability etc, go to the University web page: <http://www.otago.ac.nz/>  
Click on “studying at Otago”, then scroll down to “Exams” to get more information.

In the latter part of the semester, your personal examination timetable will be posted on eVision, giving the date, time and venue of each examination. Read your exam timetable carefully, checking that the times of your examinations do not clash. If you find there is a problem, or if you have any queries, email the Examinations Office immediately: [examinations@otago.ac.nz](mailto:examinations@otago.ac.nz)

Good luck!



## Additional support

Student Learning Development runs workshops to help you prepare for exams:

- Exam revision, preparation, and ways to improve your final mark
- Essay Writing for Exams

To attend one of these workshops, please register online at: <http://www.otago.ac.nz/hedc/students/workshop/>

You can also make an appointment to speak to one of our staff about and specific issues, and pick up tip sheets and planners from our office located on the ground floor of the ISB building.