



A short guide to essay-based exams



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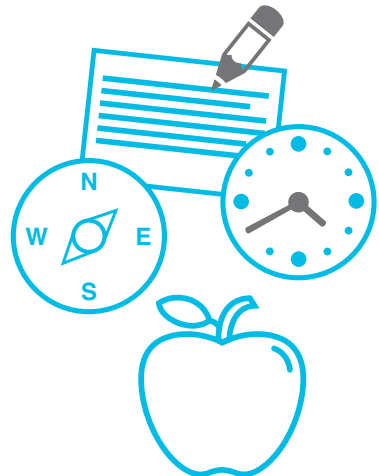


Before the examination:

- **Effective revision** is, of course, key. The better you have prepared and practised, the more confident you will feel on the day.
- **Sleep well**, in order to be able to focus during your exam.

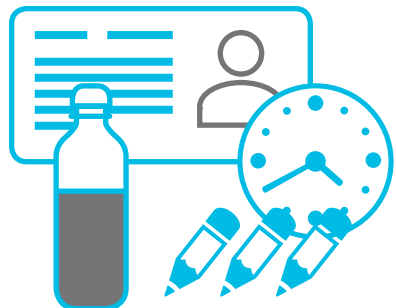


- **If you need technological support** for your exam (eg, in the case of dyslexia or dyspraxia), contact your department in advance.
- **If you are used to typing** rather than handwriting, we suggest you exercise your hand by answering questions on paper a few days prior to the exam. Otherwise, you may feel hand pain.
- **Arrive at the exam location at least 15 minutes** before its start.
- **If you do not know** where the particular building and room are, visit them in advance.
- **Eat something** beforehand to give you energy.



What you need to bring with you to the examination room:

- **Your student ID**
- **Three or more pens** and pencils
- **Water** to hydrate yourself, and a snack to eat afterwards
- **A watch** (in case the clock is too far for you to see the time well enough)



During the examination:

- **Follow the instructions** given by the examination coordinator
- **Read the exam paper** carefully
- **Make use of all your time** to answer the questions



Organising your writing time:

- **Divide your time sensibly between the questions**, according to how many marks are available for each. Stick to the time limit you've set yourself for each question, so you can do justice to the entire exam paper.
- **Once you have chosen your essay question(s), give yourself 5–10 minutes to write an essay plan.** You may wish to plan all your answers right at the start of the exam.
- **It may help to brainstorm** everything you remember about the topic, then select the points you want to make in your response. Turn these points into a bullet-pointed outline for your essay.
- **As you write, tick off the points in your plan.** Make sure you are not wandering off topic.
- **Keep an eye on the clock.**
- **Depending on your preference**, you could either write the introduction to your essay immediately, or leave a blank space to write it after you've completed your main body.
- **If you run out of time** to answer your last question(s) properly, write an essay plan in the remaining time. It may be possible for you to receive marks by doing so. The essay plan illustrates that you know how to answer the question, but that you lack time to develop your ideas further.

Answering the exam questions:

- **Pay attention to the terms used in the essay questions.** For instance, 'discuss' and 'compare' ask you for different types of responses.
- **Where appropriate, define and make clear** your understanding of the key terms in the essay title. Consider what other scholars and theories say about these terms or concepts. Reflect on the assumptions made within the essay question itself.
- **Whilst writing the essay,** bear in mind the title or question at all times. All your ideas need to be clearly related to it.
- **Follow conventional essay writing techniques.** For instance, only develop one idea per paragraph, and use signposting phrases to guide your marker through your line of reasoning.
- **If you do not have time to write the conclusion** for an exam question, leave some blank space and move to the next question. You may find some spare time later to fill in the gap.



- **Leave a blank line between your written lines:** by doing this, you will have enough space to add other ideas later (if needed), and you will make your marker's reading experience easier.

Additional tips:

- **Create a glossary.** In the run-up to your exam, it might help to create a list of the important words and phrases you need to know for each module, grouped together in different themes. Write a concise definition next to each term. Go back to your glossary regularly and test yourself.
- **Read as much as you can during your course!** It's better to study regularly throughout the year than cram just before the exam. Go through your set texts thoroughly and make sure you understand them as well as you can. Keep your notes in order and make sure you record all references correctly, to make it easier when you do come to revise.
- **Practise writing essays to time.** Get used to how much time you will be able to spend planning, writing and proofreading your work in an exam. Utilise past papers if you can, to get an idea of the types

of questions that often come up. But try not to memorise an answer to an essay question as you risk becoming panicked if that particular question doesn't appear on the day. Instead, make sure you fully understand all your course material so that you can be flexible and confident.





Further reading and references on exam preparation:

Saint John's University (n.d.) *Tips on writing the essay-type examination.*

Available from:

www.csbsju.edu/academic-advising/study-skills-guide/essay-exam

(Accessed 13 May 2016)

Tracy, E. (2006) *The student's guide to exam success.* Maidenhead:

Open University Press.

University of Birmingham. Academic Skills Centre. (2015) *Short guide to understanding your assignments.*

Available from:

<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/libraryservices/library/skills/asc/documents/public/Short-Guide-Understanding-assignment.pdf>

(Accessed:13 May 2016)

University of Birmingham. Academic Skills Centre. (2015) *Short guide to multiple choice and short answer exams.*

Available from:

<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/libraryservices/library/skills/asc/documents/public/Short-Guide-Multiple-Choice.pdf>

(Accessed: 13 May 2016)


University of Reading (n.d.).

Answering exam questions.

Available from:

www.reading.ac.uk/internal/studyadvice/StudyResources/Exams/sta-answering.aspx

(Accessed: 13 May 2016)





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