



FACULTY OF  
BUSINESS &  
ECONOMICS

# Helpsheet

## Giblin Eunson Library

## EXAM PREPARATION

### Use this sheet to help you:

- develop a ten-point strategy for exam preparation
- perform more effectively in the exams themselves

## 5 minute self test

Read the exam preparation checklist below and consider:

Which do I know how to do well? Which do I need to improve?

Do well	Need to improve	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Learn what will be tested
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Collect materials
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Develop revision goals
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Develop a revision timetable
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Organise a place for study
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Take care of yourself
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Study with others
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Develop active revision techniques
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Develop approaches for specific question types
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Use the night before effectively

Read on to learn more about each of these points

## Introduction

Exam preparation is rarely “fun”. However, it doesn’t have to be stressful, boring and unpleasant. This Helpsheet provides advice which you can put into practice from several weeks before the exam to big day itself so you can create an effective revision program.

It is recommended you begin thinking about many of the points described below well before Swot Vac.

## 1. Learn as much as you can about the exams

### a. What do exams test?

Before you begin your specific revision programme, it is worth reflecting on what nearly all exams are designed to test.

Everyone knows that exams test ability to recall information, i.e., your ability to recall and present such things as facts, definitions or concepts.

However, exams do more than this. In an exam, you may be expected to evaluate ideas, concepts or methods. You may need to compare or contrast these. You may have to apply principles or theories to address problems. Or, perhaps you will need to predict outcomes based on some given variables.

Exams, that is, test deeper levels of understanding—levels which can not come through a rushed revision program or superficial study throughout the semester.

Your ability to go well in the exams is ultimately based on the depth of engagement you have experienced throughout the semester, together, of course, with the effectiveness of your revision, your awareness of what is being sought in the exam, and your ability to manage your time in the exam.

### b. What will your exams test?

As soon as is possible, learn as much as you can about your exams.

To do this, attend all lectures and tutorials and any extra revision sessions that may be organised. See if you can access old exam papers in the library and try to identify the extent these may be similar or different to your upcoming exams. Speak with your lecturers and tutors about the exams, and talk with other students: what do they think might be in the exams, and how are they preparing for them?

It is important you develop a sense of the format of exams. Will the exams feature multiple choice questions, short answer questions, problem solving questions, or essay questions? Will they contain a variety of these? How will marks be allocated? Will all questions be compulsory, or will you have some degree of choice? All of these questions need to be addressed well before you step into the examination room.

## 2. Collect materials

As you begin to think about the coming exams, it is also important to check your materials are in order. If you haven't organised your materials carefully already, spend some time now gathering your subject guide, statements of learning objectives, lecture notes, readings, tutorial questions, and textbook questions.

Even the process of compiling your materials is a valuable revision activity. You will gain a greater awareness of the scope of the subjects, the specific areas within them and on what areas you need to prioritise your revision.

## 3. Develop revision goals

Once you have gathered all of your materials, you will be in a good position to develop specific revision goals.

Not all subjects will require the same amount of revision. Determine which subjects will require particular attention.

Following this, consider which aspects of your courses will require particular attention. What exact areas do you or don't you understand well?

List your revision goals as specifically as you can. Later you will be able to tick these off as you revise. This will help you identify how well you are going and what more you will need to do.

## 4. Develop a revision timetable

Planning your revision in terms of revision goals is an excellent strategy. Doing this in relation to a revision timetable is even better.

You may wish to create a revision timetable using a computer program such the calendar on Microsoft Outlook or iCal or iGTD on a Mac. Alternatively, you could draw up your own weekly planner. Whatever method, you are likely to find that the process of creating and using a weekly revision timetable is invaluable.

Create a timetable that covers every day of the week. List all major non-study commitments: work perhaps, or maybe sporting commitments. Then write a subject-specific (and ideally task-specific) revision timetable. Factor in short breaks every 30 or 40 minutes and longer breaks every 2 or 3 hours.

Are you an early bird or night owl? Be realistic about when you are going to be able to study effectively. And, of course, if you know your exam will be at 9.30 in the morning, don't make a habit of studying until 2 o'clock at night!

How much study should you do in a week? Only you are really able to answer this. But treating your studies as less than the equivalent of a full-time job is usually a mistake.

## 5. Organise a place for study

Effective study can only take place in a location that is conducive to study. Where do you revise? Whether at home, in a library, or in another location, the place needs to be quiet, well-lit and free of distractions.

If you are studying at home, don't ignore the effect that the cleanliness of your room can have on the order of your thoughts and your overall mood! Never to study in bed (this lead to sleepiness and ineffective study techniques.). Find a way of managing distractions such as the TV, the internet, the telephone and other people. Ask not to be disturbed and develop the habit of saying "no".

## 6. Take care of yourself

Revising is stressful. However, there are levels of stress that are healthy ("eustress") and levels that are unhealthy ("distress"). Stay on the healthy side by keeping up to date with your studies and studying effectively.

Don't forget also to eat well, to drink lots of water and to keep exercise part of your routine. At least, stay mobile and get out and about!

Regular breaks are also important, and good sleep is essential.

## 7. Study with others

Try to get together a group of students (or just one study partner) with whom you can share notes, explain content, ask for assistance or quiz each other. This can be an invaluable way to develop your understandings, your abilities to apply concepts and good revision approaches.

## 8. Develop active revision techniques

How do you revise? Do you just re-read and or perhaps just re-read and highlight points?

These approaches are mostly passive and ineffective. Effective revision requires a more active, engaged approach. Some advice about how to do this follows:

Always revise with reference to course objectives and questions. Look at your lecture notes, tutorial questions, assignments and readings, and list what you don't know. Set yourself questions.

Take notes, whether on flash cards, in a folder or book or on the computer. Jot down key concepts, ideas, definitions and examples. Be clear, creative and systematic. Create spider diagrams, mind maps, and other diagrams. Use titles, columns, dot points, numbers, and symbols, perhaps even different colours. Make summaries of ideas. Cover your notes and then try articulating the points out loud. And remember: always aim for understanding and application, not just memorisation.

## 9. Develop approaches for specific question types

Familiarise yourself with the kind of questions you will face in your exams. These could include multiple choice questions, short answer questions, problem solving questions, essay questions, or a combination of these.

### a. Multiple choice questions

To improve your ability to manage multiple choice questions, consider these tips:

Attempt questions from past exams. Pay close attention to instructions (does one answer need to be chosen or more than one answer?). Consider ways to signify your answer (eg. circles, ticks, crosses). Plan how much time you will need to spend on questions. Underline key words and be aware of words such as always, usually, only, must, should, can, best and most. Be aware of negatives (eg. "Which of the following doesn't...?"). Read all alternatives even if you seem to find the correct answer immediately. Eliminate obviously wrong answers and make intelligent guesses if you are not sure. Never fail to answer all questions; it is very rare for a multiple choice activity to penalise you for wrong answers.

### b. Short answer questions

To revise for short answer questions, review all course materials carefully and note important terms, definitions and examples. Try to find questions that relate to these and practise at least some questions in exam conditions, with your time planned carefully. As always, read questions and instructions carefully. Consider the number of marks allocated to each question and, therefore, the number of points likely to be needed. Consider making brief notes before you write your answer. Attempt all necessary questions.

For short answer questions, your answers will need to be short and punchy. Refer to the **Study and Research Helpsheet: Paragraphs** for advice on how to write topic sentences that express your positions directly and advice on how to sequence and write supporting sentences.

## c. Problem solving questions

To revise for problem solving questions, review past tutorial work, assignments and texts, and list major concepts, formulas, methods, and theories. Attempt as many problems as you can, paying close attention to which concepts, formulas, methods and theories apply.

Practising in exam conditions can be useful. However, it is also useful to practise problem-solving questions slowly. This can allow you to explain each step to yourself (or, ideally, to a study partner). Being clear and organised about your approach is essential. Once you have finished the questions, review them carefully (again, ideally with another student), paying particular attention to the areas that cause you difficulty.

## d. Essay questions

Are you so confident about writing essays that you feel you could write a strong essay in a situation of great time pressure and stress? Even if you do feel confident about writing essays, you may wish to review the **Study and Research Helpsheet: Essays for advice**.

To begin preparing for exam questions, review old essay tasks and exams together with other materials from the course, and try to anticipate likely exam essay topics. Highlight topic and task words in questions and only begin to write after you determine exactly what is being asked.

Planning is essential. Brainstorm and note ideas that could become main ideas and supporting points. In this planning stage, write a thesis statement which features some of the key topic words and addresses the question directly. Then, prepare a quick plan of what you will put in the introduction and how many paragraphs you will need in the body (one main point per paragraph). Your conclusion will then restate your main argument (your "thesis") and summarise your main points before perhaps offering a relevant "final thought".

Of course, you will not be expected to provide references as you would for an essay prepared in semester. However, you are expected to provide evidence to ensure you are not just presenting assertions, but rather, solid, well-supported arguments. What is expected is not a mountain of description, but rather analysis, application and argument. Your "voice" must be clear.

## **d. Essay questions (contd)**

Order your points logically. Don't make the mistake of just writing about what is easiest for you to start with. In an argumentative essay, you may wish to put forward your strongest points first. Or perhaps, you will need to organise the essay according to time sequence or cause and effect.

It can be useful to practice exam questions by just preparing essay plans instead of writing complete essays. When preparing plans, write full sentences for the thesis statement and for the topic sentences, but just dot points for your support.

However, do practise some essay questions in exam conditions. Pay attention to time and the word limits. Pay attention also to your handwriting. Do not ignore the psychological impact awful handwriting might have on the examiner! Bad handwriting can have a negative effect on the reader's attitude towards your work.

Furthermore, consider your language: your vocabulary, sentence structure, grammar and expression. Should you try to impress with complex, multi-clause, jargon-filled sentences? No! Clarity is essential.

And now for some advice that is all too often ignored. Leave a few minutes at the end for checking. If you notice mistakes, don't waste time messing around with correction fluid. Cross them out with a single straight line.

## **10. Use the night before effectively**

You will most likely feel nervous the night before, but this is not a time to panic or cram. Provided you have stuck to an organised and thoughtful revision plan, you should have no need to worry about using part of the evening to review, rewrite and recite, in moderation.

Finally, pack your bag (watch, pens, ID, calculator, rubber, ruler, drink), set your alarm, and go over the basics of how to get to the exam venue in time. And then try to have a good sleep!

## On the day

### Stay smart before the exam

Get up in good time. Dress for the weather and have a good breakfast. Don't overdo the coffee! Check the venue and information about your journey again. Don't panic, don't cram, and don't engage in nervous discussions with others outside the exam room. Just read your notes calmly and do your best to stay positive.

### Use reading time effectively

Don't ignore the importance of the reading time! Check again how much time you have for the exam. Scan the exam. Pay attention to the number of sections and questions. Identify which questions are compulsory. Plan your time and decide which questions to begin with (perhaps those you can answer most confidently). Read instructions and questions carefully and note how marks are allocated.

## In the exam

Stay calm and stick to the timing that you set for yourself. Nasty surprises are unlikely if you have prepared well.

If you find yourself stuck or feel your mind has "gone blank", don't panic. Breathe slowly and return to the question(s) later if necessary. Whatever you do, don't leave answers blank. And of course, never leave the exam early! Whether you feel you have done well, or it's been a disaster, there almost always will be something you will be able to do better if you put in a bit more time.

## After the exam

You may feel worried after the exam, perhaps even miserable. However, if you do experience negative emotions, talking with others about what they wrote and how different it was, can make you feel more worse, as can engaging in discussions or self-talk about how you "should have done this" or "shouldn't have done that".

Reflecting on how you approached the exam is valuable. But just after the exam itself, give yourself a break!

## Further help

For further information you may wish to consider the some of the following sources (if applicable):

- Your lecturers and tutors
- Other students
- The Counselling Service
- The Disability Liaison Unit

Don't forget also to check the LMS for information about:

- Exam dates, places, times
- Answers to FAQs
- Special consideration procedures

**All the best!**