

Exam success

Written by the Division of Student Life

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Preparation

Balancing study, rest and recreation

Exams can be very stressful; it is important to maintain a balance in your life.

- Create a study space at home or use the library.
- Ensure your study environment includes adequate lighting and ventilation. Make sure your computer and keyboard are set up to minimise impact on your neck and back.
- Advise your family and friends. Let them know you will be studying for exams and when you will be sitting exams. They can't help you if they don't know what's going on!
- Try to maintain your normal sleep routine; optimal sleep time is between seven and nine hours. Don't study late into the night; it's counterproductive.
- Do some exercise. Aim for at least half an hour a day of some type of physical activity (a brisk walk, a stretch session).
- Always eat breakfast and lunch during the exam period and snack every two to three hours on energy food such as nuts, seeds and fruit or a wholemeal muffin. To boost brain power, concentration and energy increase protein and, to a lesser extent, carbohydrate foods. Eat lots of fresh fruit and vegetables. Avoid take-away or junk foods which interfere with good mental function and drink two to three litres of plain water every day.
- Nurture yourself. Do something you enjoy; it's not wasted time away from study but another strategy to improve your study and exam performance.
- Think positively. The way in which you think about the exams will affect the way you feel about the exams.
- De-clutter your life. Make a list of those things in your life that drain you of energy. Look at each item and decide whether to do it, dump it, or delegate it. Now make a list of those things that recharge your batteries, things that you do that lift your spirit. Do something from this list soon.
- Keep healthy prior to and during the exam period. Good health helps you cope better with stress, improves your concentration, increases energy and ensures you are less vulnerable to illness such as colds and flu. This is even more important if you live on residence or in a large share house.

Remember: strategies, information, friends and support will enable you to achieve success with your studies. And remember to keep a balance!

Preparation

Setting goals

Setting personal success and study success goals is the first step to planning and organising your time. It's difficult to plan effectively if you have not set realistic goals.

- Make lists of your personal and study goals (both short term and long term) for the time leading up to exams and prioritise them.
- Make sure your goals are **SMART** goals.

S = specific: tell you exactly what has to be done. The more specific they are the more they motivate (e.g. walk for half an hour each day; spend one hour revising each unit per day).

M = measurable: establish the minimum level of performance required to ensure you have achieved your goal (e.g. walk for five out of seven days per week; revise each unit for one hour per day, six out seven days per week).

A = authentic: fit in with your long-term goals and values (e.g. fit with long-term goal to maintain physical fitness; fit in with long-term goal to successfully complete units for this year).

R = realistic: push you out of your comfort zone but are still realistic (e.g. before I set this goal I only walked three times per week or less; before I set this goal my approach to revision was unstructured).

T = timeframe: specify when it's going to happen (e.g. each night between 5.00 pm–6.00 pm; each day before 9.00 pm).

- Develop a systematic action plan to achieve your goals (e.g. add walking to study and leisure timetable; buy walking shoes, draw up a revision timetable and choose a place to set out notes).
- Learn how to deal with setbacks (e.g. had the flu. See your timetable as flexible and plans as responsive and adjust to deal with the disruption; find an extra 30 minutes each day over the next week to make up for lost time).
- Structure your environment to support the achievement of your goals (e.g. meet a friend at a designated place and walk together; find a quiet place to study with access to computer and obtain copies of past exam papers).

Remember: we all have 86 400 seconds in a day. Plan and use them use wisely.

Preparation

A revision timetable

Putting together a revision timetable ensures that all units are covered and your time is used wisely.

- The ideal time to start preparing for exams is in week one. As you finish a topic, don't just put your notes aside and focus on the next topic. Find time in the next week to finalise and summarise your previous week's topic. Continue in this way throughout the semester rather than leave this until the end of semester. If you can, revisit past topics by reading over these summaries. Re-reading these topics helps move the information into your long-term memory—the best place for it!
- If you begin your exam preparation later in the semester, assess where you are at in terms of assignments and required reading, and work out how much time you have for exam preparation.
- Assess the amount of material you need to learn, how well you understand each unit, and note the date for each exam.
- Based on these assessments, set a 'big picture' revision plan (i.e. when you plan to start and finish each unit).
- Work in short study periods and make sure that each study period has a clear start and finish time (e.g. 9.00 am–9.30 am, 9.45 am–10.45 am).
- Have a clear task for each study period:
 - 9.00 am–10.30 am: summarise topic one
 - 11.00 am–11.45 am: read through chapter four of the textbook.
- Planning a study session with a friend/s can help you prepare.
- Use deadlines and rewards to help motivate you.

Remember: planning early reduces the chance of having to 'cram' for your exams.

Preparation

What are the examiners looking for?

It is very helpful to have an idea about what the examiners are looking for when they read your exam paper.

Examiners want to see that you have thought about new ideas and can argue a point of view; they do not want to just check that you remember information from your study guide and lectures.

Generally, examiners want to see that:

- you have covered the course material outlined in the unit guide
- you have understood the content—theories, models, concepts—of the unit
- you have engaged with the information, ideas and issues presented in your unit
- you have answered the question/s
- you can apply what you have learned to solving problems or presenting an argument to answer the question/s
- your answer is clearly organised and logical
- you provide more than just the facts; they often want you to give an opinion, develop an idea or discuss a position
- your arguments and opinions are supported by evidence
- you can express your ideas clearly.

Remember: have a look at the aims and objectives in each unit guide. These will clearly state what the examiners expect you to know.

Preparation

Types of exams

Essays

These test your memory of the unit material and your essay writing abilities (e.g. to analyse the question and respond appropriately with full sentences; to use correct spelling and a logical structure; to include an introduction, proper paragraphs and a conclusion). Referencing is not required in exams.

Short answers

These also test your knowledge of the unit content. Answer these in full sentences with correct spelling.

Multiple choice

This tests your memory for detail and your ability to remember the unit material and discriminate between similar answers. You must know your material very well.

Problem solving

This tests your ability to apply formulas to new problems. Know your formulas thoroughly and practise applying them to various examples.

Open book

This can reduce some of the psychological pressure in an exam, but you still must know your subject content. In most exams there is no time to read a book; you need to locate your material quickly. A few sheets of notes can sometimes be better than books.

Online tests

These are sometimes used throughout the semester as part of progressive assessment rather than as a final exam. Online tests have monitored and controlled start and stop times and could involve multiple choice questions, short answers or essay responses.

Remember: copies of past exams may be available from the Library or on DSO.

Preparation

Disability or ongoing medical condition

Students with a disability or ongoing medical condition may need some assistance to minimise the impact of their disability. It is important to plan ahead and talk to the staff at the Disability Resource Centre (DRC) if you think you may need an alternate arrangement or accommodation.

To minimise the impact of a disability or medical condition:

- When enrolling in a unit always check what format the assessment takes.
- Ask yourself whether the listed assessment format is one that you can do on an equal footing with all other students. For example, can you sit still and write for the time set for the exam? Can you write or do you need to use a computer? Does sitting in a room with a large number of people have a negative impact on you? Do you need the exam in an alternate print format? Will you be in hospital?
- Speak to the DRC staff as early as possible to explore options.
- Be realistic about your own requirements and what can be accommodated—don't forget that the teaching staff have to be able to assess your knowledge, work and competency.
- Read all information sent to you about your exam and the arrangements that are in place—if you need the information in an alternate format ask the DRC.
- If you don't understand the instructions, if you don't think they are in line with what you agreed to with the DRC, or if they no longer apply, contact the DRC as soon as possible.
- If you have a medical condition or medical symptoms that are unpredictable, tell your unit chair and become familiar with the special consideration process.
- Check that arrangements are all in place and that you know where to go and what you need to do at least five working days before the exam.
- After each exam period review the arrangements. If there were any problems tell the DRC staff.

Further information: www.deakin.edu.au/disability

Remember: planning ahead and talking to staff will ensure all necessary arrangements are in place.

Study and revision

Revision skills

Thorough revision of your units before each exam is essential. It will build your confidence for the performance on the day. Remember that lack of effective revision and preparation is a major reason why students fail. So do the work now for exam success!

- Know what to expect for each exam—ask your tutor and lecturer, and read about your exams in your unit guides.
- Make summaries of textbook chapters, study guides or unit materials. Making notes—preferably by hand—ensures that you will actively engage with the material, think about it and remember it.
- Handwrite your notes. It's good to practise this as most exams require clear and legible handwriting.
- Study in short bursts (e.g. a 50-minute session with a 10-minute break) and repeat this over a day.
- Study at the times you are most alert and focused; this may be early morning or late evening — work out what suits you.
- After you have made your summaries of the units, go back and revise them again—preferably a few days after. In this second review session you could do all of the following:
 - highlight all the main points under topic headings
 - make word lists of key terms and concepts and display them around your room
 - read your notes on to a tape or CD-ROM and listen to them repeatedly when you are walking, driving, riding on public transport, or doing housework.
- Repetition is the key to remembering, so do it often and in a variety of ways to reinforce your memory.

Remember: the best revision is active revision—making notes and summaries of main points from your key texts is the most effective way to begin the memorising process.

Study and revision

Improving and testing subject knowledge

A detailed and thorough knowledge of your subject will boost your exam performance.

- Go back through all your lecture and tutorial notes and work out which ones you missed – if any. Get the missing notes from DSO, your lecturer or a friend. Read them and make notes.
- Get an overview of each unit by reading through the aims and objectives, as well as the introductions, objectives and contents pages of each topic. Copy these pages, put them where you can see them easily, and refer to them constantly while you are revising. This will provide you with a map of the unit and an understanding of how each topic fits into the overall unit.
- Seek help from tutors and lecturers to clear up any confusion before the end of the semester. Ask another student to help.
- Go through your study guide/DSO materials and look again at the reading lists. Did you read and make notes from these each week? If not, you can improve your subject knowledge by doing this.
- Answer questions from your textbook or study guide
- Read relevant unit material for pleasure—it will really improve your subject knowledge.
- Discuss what you are studying with interested others—a friend/partner/parent. Your knowledge will improve dramatically.
- Attend all lectures and tutorials (where appropriate), access the unit's DSO site and join in any subject discussions.
- Practise answering exam questions under exam conditions— time yourself and write by hand.
- Write your own questions and answers to test your knowledge.

Remember: thorough preparation is the best way of staying confident in an exam. To understand how well you are doing, test yourself before the exam.

Study and revision

Essay writing in exams

Essay writing in exams requires planning and logical structure from the outset. You can't cut and paste in an exam!

- Analyse the question.
- Underline key words.
- Work out your argument and main points.
- Make a plan.
- Begin with a strong first sentence.
- Include key words from the question in your introduction.
- Begin each paragraph with a key point from the introduction.
- Develop each point in a complete paragraph.
- Use transitions to connect your points from one paragraph to the next.
- Keep to your time allocation.

Remember: drafting a plan is the key. Practise planning and writing essays.

Study and revision

Relaxation

If we teach our bodies to relax, the symptoms of stress can be relieved.

- Breathing: breathe in and count to five and then breathe out and say to yourself RELAX. Do this two or three times until you feel the tension drop away.
- Muscle relaxation: tense your hands and count to five, let go and relax your hands to the count of five. Repeat, tensing different muscles in your body such as your arms, shoulders, neck, face, chest, stomach, back, bottom, calves and feet. When you've completed the sequence, repeat again if necessary.
- Creative visualisation: this is a great relaxation method. One way is to imagine yourself on a beach, or in an open space with a large balloon and basket. Put all your worries in the basket and watch the balloon float away in the distance. If you are very stressed it's a good idea to see a counsellor for individual strategies.
- Go to a gym; have a massage; go for a walk.
- Posture: did you know that good posture can reduce tension? It can! For those who enjoy yoga, check the local services for information about class times and costs. If you prefer something different to yoga, physiotherapists in your local area offer one-to-one or group classes that help you improve your posture while having fun exercising.
- Alter the nagging thought patterns that can get in the way and cause stress and worry. A trained counsellor can help you develop a more positive outlook.
- Meditation: a developed skill to clear your mind and body of unwanted tensions. There are many methods and styles of meditation available.

Remember: in the lead up to exams, a balance between study and relaxation is essential.

The day of the exam

What to do and what not to do

This is the time when the hard work you've put into your study during the semester really shows.

- DO check the exam timetable the day before your exam.
- DO NOT stay up all night studying. Avoid excess caffeine or energy drinks.
- DO go to bed at a reasonable hour the night before your exam.
- DO eat a healthy breakfast to maintain energy for the exam; go for high protein foods (e.g. eggs, milk, a fruit smoothie).
- DO have a plan for travelling to the exam, parking and finding the venue.
- DO NOT be late.
- DO leave home early to avoid last minute panic about being late.
- DO check that you have everything you need: ID card, pens, water, calculator.
- DO NOT turn up with bags and equipment that you may not be able to take into the room with you—check what is and isn't allowed.
- DO NOT stand around outside the exam room with students who are hyped up and talking themselves into being stressed; wait outside in a peaceful area.
- DO NOT engage in negative talk with yourself or others.
- DO use deep breathing to relax your body and mind. If your mind goes blank, focus on slow deep breathing, ten breaths, eyes closed.
- DO eat a light lunch (e.g. meat/salad roll and fruit) if you have an afternoon exam. Avoid high fat meals which will make you feel tired.

Remember: your thoughts affect the way you feel—think positively.

The day of the exam

In the exam

This is it! How are you going to make the most of the two or three hours in the exam room to show what you know and what you can do?

Use your reading time effectively

- Get an overview of the structure of the paper and identify compulsory sections.
- Read all instructions very carefully, and then read them again to ensure you understand.
- Read all the questions carefully and, if there is a choice, select the questions you want to answer.
- Decide on the order in which you will answer questions, making sure that you do not leave compulsory questions until the end. Answer easier questions first as these will boost your confidence and may even allow you to pick up some extra time that you can spend on more difficult questions.

Essays

- Analyse the question, underline the key words and make a plan. Put what you have been practising during revision into action.

Short answer questions

- Underline the key words in the question. These will determine how you will answer it.
- Answer the question precisely, concisely and clearly—your examiner is not a mind reader. The number of marks often indicates how many points you need to make.

Multiple-choice questions

- Read all the choices, even if you think the first one is correct.
- Eliminate answers you know are wrong, that is, answers which contradict common sense, are illogical, or those which you can't understand.
- Be wary of options which include absolutes (words such as always, never, all, none) because they will often make a statement false.

Open-book exams

- These can be a trap. You do not have time to read your textbook in an exam. Be very familiar with the structure of the textbook and mark sections which are frequently referred to. Sticky labels are very useful.

Remember: planning your answers, especially for essays, will save much more time than it takes.

The day of the exam

Improving your score

After all the effort you've put in, it is frustrating to lose marks unnecessarily. Stay on the task and watch your time.

- Attempt every question you are required to do even if you're not sure of the answer.
- Mark compulsory questions - don't leave them until last.
- Don't let a mental block stop you. You can:
 - leave the question and come back to it later
 - try paraphrasing the question in your own words
 - think where the topic fits into the structure of your unit and try to find links to what you are trying to remember.
- Work out the amount of time you can spend on each question. The time should be proportional to the allocated marks. For example, if a question is worth 30 per cent of the marks, you should allocate 30 per cent of your time. Don't go beyond the time you have set for yourself.
- Make sure you answer the question. Not doing so is a major reason for not succeeding in exams.
- Write to express yourself simply and clearly.
- Write legibly. We rely so much on computers that our handwriting has suffered.
- Try to leave some time to review your answers at the end.
- If you run out of time, write an outline showing how you intended to answer the question.
- If you become anxious, close your eyes, take a comfortable deep breath, and then let the air out slowly and quietly.

Remember: stay focused—give it your best!

After the exam

Reviewing your performance

The exams are finally over; time to relax! But think back on how you prepared for each exam, and how you went on the day.

- Were you able to keep to your exam revision timetable? If you didn't have a timetable, or you weren't able to finish the revision you planned, think about why this happened.
- Did you match your study to the type of questions you were asked to answer? Your revision should include time to practise writing the type of answers you'll be writing during the exam.
- Did you build up your own summaries of topics? This is a good way to develop your understanding and remember information. Repetition helps you learn.
- Were you surprised by the type of exam questions on the paper? Think about how you might have helped yourself be more familiar with the type of questions on the paper. Looking at past exam papers is one way of doing this, if they are available. Otherwise you should check your unit guide, DSO or ask your lecturer.
- When you were preparing for the exam, were you an active learner? Active learners ask themselves questions, and continually test their understanding of concepts and their ability to retain what they're studying.
- On the day of the exam did you make the best use of the reading time? During reading time you should read instructions carefully, choose the questions you will answer, plan your time and start to plan your answers.
- Did you match the time you spent on an answer with the marks allocated? If you ran out of time or had to rush to finish off, you need to think of a better way of planning your time.
- Did you understand the question? It is quite common for exam markers to comment that students didn't answer the question. If this was your problem try to decide whether it was because you didn't take time to work out what was being asked, your answer wasn't well structured, or your revision was inadequate.

Remember: take some time to reflect. It's important to build on your strengths and learn from your mistakes.

After the exam

Special consideration

The University has a process in place for times when serious circumstances could affect your results; for example ill health, hardship or trauma.

It is called *applying for special consideration*.

- Applications for special consideration should be lodged online. To access the application portal, log in to Student Connect and click 'Special consideration' in the left vertical menu. Read all the information carefully and follow the prompts to submit your application.
- Further information is available from your faculty campus office or student centres.
- An application for special consideration must be lodged no later than three University working days after the due date of the assessment items or the date of a scheduled examination.
- Students, who for very genuine reasons are not able to apply online, must contact their faculty campus office or student centre.

Further information:

www.deakin.edu.au/current-students/study-support/special-consideration

Further information and useful resources

Counselling and personal development

- www.deakin.edu.au/counselling

Disability Resource Centre

- www.deakin.edu.au/disability

Exam tips

- Click on the *Exam preparation* link at www.deakin.edu.au/study-success
- Click on *Information for students* and then *Achieving in study and learning* at www.deakin.edu.au/counselling
- Click on *Exam health tips* at www.deakin.edu.au/current-students/services/health
- *Study success: A practical guide for tertiary students*; (electronic resource with captions and transcripts for hearing-impaired students). Deakin University Library; call no. 371.30281Dea/Ssa

Health services

- www.deakin.edu.au/current-students/services/health

Library

- www.deakin.edu.au/library

Special consideration

- www.deakin.edu.au/current-students/study-support/special-consideration

Study skills

- www.deakin.edu.au/study-success

Time management and goal setting

- Click on the *A-Z index* at www.deakin.edu.au/study-success

Workshops on exam preparation

- Click on the *Workshops* link at www.deakin.edu.au/study-success