Strategies for tests and exams

A great deal of the assessment relies on your ability to successfully manage tests and exams, that is, your ability to perform under pressure. There are three key aspects to successful exam performance:

- preparation
- rehearsal
- performance.

Preparation

- Be active – just passively reading through or highlighting your notes is not active. Later you may not remember why you highlighted material.

- Review the course:
  - What was the course about?
  - What did the lecturer want me to know and be able to do at the end of each week? End of 13 weeks?
  - What did the various course topics have in common?
  - What kinds of questions were students asked?

Strategies

- Ask tutors/lecturers what markers are looking for in a ‘good’ answer.
- Make summaries of key topic areas.
- Make a discipline-specific vocabulary list so that in the exam – without a spell checker – you can spell and use discipline-specific terms correctly.
- Practise explaining key concepts to a study group – this helps you articulate and retain what you know, and identify gaps in your knowledge.
- Work consistently – don’t imagine that the practice of studying for assessment items/the exam the night before will work for you at uni.

Rehearsal

Students are often good at preparing for exams, but they forget to rehearse what they know – that is, they forget to practise applying what they know. Thus, they perform poorly in exams.

Strategies

- Analyse the kinds of questions you could be asked in exams. The disciplinary content will not change – but
the question will. Not understanding the question immediately confuses students, even though they know the content, so practise analysing questions.

• Rehearse drawing and labelling tables and diagrams you may need.
• Rehearse the process of answering – the logical steps – because even if you end up with the wrong answer, you may get marks for showing the process.
• Write ‘mock’ answers to questions – applying what you know.
• Ask your tutor/lecturer to give you feedback on your mock answers:
  — Have you understood the content matter?
  — Have you structured your answer well?
  — Have you written too much? (ie how long is a ‘short’ answer?)
  — Have you given a clear explanation?
  — Could you be more concise/precise in your answer?
  — Rehearse time management strategies. Practise writing out answers against a time limit. It often takes longer than you think to gather all your thoughts so you can prepare your answer.

Performance – prior to the exam

On a practical level, you need to turn up to the right place, at the right time and be clear about the rules, so:

• check the timetable for exams thoroughly – locate the venue the day before the exams
• know what you can/can’t take into the exam, and what you can/can’t do in reading time
• be very clear about exam rules for emergency, sickness etc.

In the exam

• Allocate your time immediately – and stick to it. Often students perform extremely well on the first half of the paper, and then run out of time. This means that the overall quality of their exam performance is moderated down. Better to do all the exam paper reasonably well than some of it not at all.
• Breathe! Students often forget to do this and become very stressed.
• Analyse the questions carefully – what have you been asked to do?
• Breathe again!
• Plan your answers to major questions.
• Use short clear sentences.
• Clearly define terms and label diagrams.
• Stick to your time management plan.
• If you get stuck on a question:
  — talk to yourself (in your head): how would I explain how to do this to another person? What steps are involved?
  — if talking to yourself doesn’t work, breathe, move on and come back to it later.
• If you cannot finish a question, summarise the final points you would have made.

After the exam

• Ask to see your exam paper and work out where your strengths and weakness were (not where you ‘guessed’ them to be).