Preparing for exams

• Be familiar with your course outlines, and the sections of the course that will be examined. This will help you focus your revision.

• Go through your lecture notes and notes from readings. Three waves of revision are often needed:
  1. From full text of notes (full paragraphs).
  2. Single lines which contain key ideas.
  3. Dot points, which could be taken to the exam if it is open book.

• Ideally, you should start this at the beginning of the course, making one-page summaries of lectures plus notes from your own reading. Make sure all your notes are up to date.

• Set yourself possible questions and see if you can write sample answers, within a time limit. Find exam papers from previous years (not too old, check if the format has changed) and try to answer questions, under a time limit, from these as practice.

• Use these practice exam sessions to practise writing for a longer period by hand, and writing legibly. Practise writing on every second line, so that if you have to make corrections, you can do them legibly on the line above.

• Check what the lecturer requires with respect to quotes, citations etc. If she/he requires you to be able to attribute data, ideas, concepts, approaches to specific authors in the exam, then when you prepare your sample questions, note the most important writers in the field, so that you can remember them later.

• Organise a study group with other students doing the course. Prepare possible questions, answer them, swap and discuss them.

• Anticipate how to reduce exam anxiety (see our handout ‘Managing exam anxiety’).

• Identify additional resources. Check with your College Office to see:
  — whether you can have access to a dictionary in the exam room
  — whether, if you are in first year, first semester, and English is not your first language, you are entitled to extra exam time.

There are various types of exam:

• Closed book exams can comprise:
1. **Essay exams**: rely on your ability to write critically, in a structured format, in a short period of time.

2. **Short answer exams**: rely on your ability to recall information about a range of topics. The length may vary from a single word/phrase to a paragraph/half a page. In the latter case, it is not expected that you will put forward a line of argument, but more likely that you will have to give a definition in your own words, or perform other tasks depending on the wording of the question.

3. **A combination** of multiple choice and other questions, or a combination of short answer questions and essay questions.

   - **Take-home exams**: these sound easy, but the criteria for marking are often stricter. You are still required to demonstrate your own critical analysis of the question and not plagiarise, while satisfying all the requirements of a conventional essay such as accurate and complete referencing. Management of the given time is important.

   - **Open book exams**: these may also sound easy, but this is misleading. Even though you are able to take your books and/or notes into the exam, you should not rely on your ability to look up answers quickly. You should already know the principles of the subject before you go into the exam. Good notes are crucial here.

   - **Multiple choice questions**: rely on your ability to memorise/recognise pieces of information so that you can choose the correct answer in the exam. Needs quick, accurate reading of questions. It’s important to **analyse** the questions carefully.

See also:
