



Preparing For and Writing Tests & Exams

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INTRODUCTION

This booklet has been developed to assist you in preparing for and writing tests and exams. The information presented here is a condensation of material contained in several resource books dealing with college study skills. A complete listing of these books can be found in the bibliography on the last page.

If you would like more information, Academic Support Centre staff are available to assist you individually.

YOUR TEST PERFORMANCE

A test proves how well you can perform:

*On that particular test;
On that particular day;
At that particular time.*

NO MORE!

NO LESS!

A test does not measure:

*Your intelligence;
Your performance as a friend;
Your ability to complete and pass a course.*

If you fail a test:

*The sun will still rise
You can still eat your breakfast
Your friends, family and pets will still love you
Hot water will still come out of the hot water tap
The car will still start
Teachers will still welcome you to class
(and likely will be even more willing to help you!)*

Life will go on.

“F” does not mean personal failure!

PART A PREPARING FOR TESTS AND EXAMS

Ideally, preparing for tests and exams should start on the first day of class. This system of preparation is described below. However, not all of us follow the ideal! Therefore, we have included a separate section for those who start preparing for tests and exams late.

1. STARTING EARLY

- **Preparing for tests and exams can actually start on the first day of class when you begin to obtain the information you need. Review your course outline and/or check with your instructor to find out:**
 - **What material will be covered in the course and what you will be responsible for knowing for tests and exams, i.e., lecture notes, text books, films, guest speakers, handouts of printed material.**
 - **When tests and exams are scheduled.**
 - **Whether the test will be:**
 - (a) **Comprehensive – covering all material presented since the beginning of the term.**
 - (b) **Non-comprehensive – covering only the information presented since the last exam.**
 - **What types of tests and exams will be given (e.g. multiple choice, essay questions, etc.)?**
 - **What each test and exam is worth toward your final mark.**
- **REDUCE your material as soon after the class as possible into study notes and review once a week. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways:**

PART A PREPARING FOR TESTS AND EXAMS

1. STARTING EARLY (con't)

- **Writing key words and phrases in the margin of your lecture notes, textbooks and handouts.**
- **Writing a summary in point form of each lecture or textbook chapter.**
- **Highlighting important information.**
- **Writing questions on the front of 3" x 5" cards with the answers in point form on the back.**
- **Experiment with different tricks to help you remember (e.g. nonsense rhymes, anagrams, etc.) and use a technique that works best for you.**
- **REVIEW your reduced material on a regular basis. Studies have shown that distributing your review, rather than cramming at the last minute, is more effective for recalling information. This distributed review allows you to transfer information from your short-term to long-term memory, making it easier to recall at exam time.**
- **SCHEDULE your time. You will require time to reduce your material and to review on a regular basis. Devise a realistic schedule and try to stick to it.**
- **STUDY ACTIVELY and RECITE the material. Don't just read your notes or text over and over or underline or highlight information. This is a passive way of studying and isn't very effective. Get involved! Ways of doing this may include:**
 - **Glancing at key words, phrases, or questions and reciting the answer out loud in your own words.**

PART A PREPARING FOR TESTS AND EXAMS

1. STARTING EARLY (con't)

- Writing the material over and over until you can do it from memory.
 - Having a friend or family member ask you questions.
 - Writing a practice test and answering questions from memory. Mark it to identify your weak areas.
- Do a quick, overall review the night before the test or exam.

2. STARTING LATE

What do you do when you have left your studying to the last minute?

Although we do not recommend leaving studying until late in the semester, the following method is a useful technique when unforeseen circumstances leave you short of time.

- Go through your lecture notes, handouts, textbooks and course outlines; and make a list of all the major topics or areas on which you will be tested. Use major headings and subheadings, but don't include any details at this point.
- Make a separate detailed study sheet for each item on your overall list. Some ideas to keep in mind when you are preparing the sheets are:
 - Write big and write fast – get down as much as possible in a short period of time.

PART A PREPARING FOR TESTS AND EXAMS

2. STARTING LATE (con't)

- Use point form – write enough information so that when you look at the words or phrases you have written, related ideas and details will come to mind.
- Use headings, sub-headings, underlining and numbering to make study sheets as organized as possible.
- Use your own words as much as possible to check your understanding of the material and to prepare yourself for possible essay questions.
- TEST yourself or have someone test you. Recite out loud or rewrite from memory.
- Spend more time on important topics and learn these well.

PART B WRITING TESTS AND EXAMS

1. GENERAL RULES

- Make sure you have the required supplies with you (e.g. pens, pencils, rulers, calculator, etc.).
- As soon as you get your test, write anything that you want to remember (facts, dates, equations, memory cues, etc.) in light pencil at the top of your test or on the back side of the first page.
- Listen closely to any verbal instructions, and carefully read the test directions.
- Read through the test or exam before you begin and develop a plan.

PART B

WRITING TESTS AND EXAMS

1. GENERAL RULES (con't)

- **Plan your time.** Roughly estimate how much time you should spend on each section in order to complete it on time. Check to see how many marks each section is worth and spend more time on sections worth the most marks. For example, if you have a one-hour test with 25 multiple-choice questions and 2 essay questions, you could allot 15 minutes for the multiple choice questions, 15 minutes for each essay question, and 10 minutes to check over your answers.
- **As you begin, read the overall directions and/or the directions for each question carefully and completely.** Watch for key words and two part questions.
- **Answer the questions that you are sure of first.** Mark any questions you are not sure of with a dot or light check mark so you can come back to them later. You may get some ideas and associations which will help with the difficult questions as you progress through the paper.
- **When you are not sure of an answer, go with your first instinct; make a guess if you know you won't be penalized for it.** In other words, if all your wrong answers are being subtracted from your correct answers to obtain your mark, it would be better to leave a question blank if you don't know the answer than guess incorrectly.

Don't panic if you don't know the answers to the first few questions. Sometimes it takes a few minutes for your brain to get in gear. Chances are you will know the answers when you come back to them!

- **Once you have indicated an answer, don't change it unless you are absolutely sure your new answer is correct.**
- **Proofread your paper before you hand it in.**

PART B

WRITING TESTS AND EXAMS

2. ANSWERING SPECIFIC TYPES OF QUESTIONS

A. True – False Questions

- ◆ Read each statement carefully and look for any limiting or key words (e.g. all, some, none, never, always, usually, frequently). For example, in the statement “Much of human behaviour is instinctive”, much is a limiting word. This statement is more likely to be true than a statement which contains a word that allows no room for exceptions, such as “always”, “never”, “all”, or “none”.
- ◆ Watch for double negatives. Two negative words in a sentence indicate a positive relationship in standard English usage.
e.g. A test may not be without poorly worded questions. In this sentence *not* and *without* cancel each other. This sentence is saying that a test may have poorly worded questions, and the answer then, is true.
- ◆ Remember that the answer must be true in its entirety for ‘true’ to be the correct response.
- ◆ It is important to read True/False questions very carefully; one word will often determine whether a statement is True or False.

B. Fill-in-the-Blank Questions

- ◆ Use the grammar of the sentence as a cue to the answer. For example, should the missing word be a noun, verb, etc., singular or plural?
- ◆ Make the answer logically consistent with the rest of the sentence.

PART B WRITING TESTS AND EXAMS

2. ANSWERING SPECIFIC TYPES OF QUESTIONS (con'd)

C. Matching Questions

- ◆ Do those that you are sure of first and cross off the choices as you use them.
- ◆ Reason out, as best you can, the remaining items.
- ◆ When responses are used only once, do not blindly fill in the last question with the only remaining choice. Check to make sure it fits. If not, recheck all answers.

D. Multiple Choice Questions

- ◆ Read the stem or question first; stop and think of the answer; then look for it in the list of choices.
- ◆ Read all of the answer choices. There will probably be a couple that sound like they could be correct; don't be tempted to mark the first one that sounds good.
- ◆ If you are not sure of the correct answer, try eliminating those choices that you know are incorrect by crossing them out. Then make an educated guess.
- ◆ If two of the choices are similar or opposite, probably one of them is the correct answer.
- ◆ Watch for any limiting words in the question and in the choices (e.g. never, always, all, none).
- ◆ If you feel that you don't know the answer, try concentrating on each of the choices separately and carefully. Sometimes one of them will give you a clue to the meaning of the question itself.

PART B WRITING TESTS AND EXAMS

2. ANSWERING SPECIFIC TYPES OF QUESTIONS con't

D. Multiple Choice Questions (con't)

- ◆ Another alternative is to read the question repeatedly with each separate choice. Sometimes one of the choices will appear to complete the thought of the question better than the others.
- ◆ Remember, overall, incorrect answers tend to be either very brief in response or very long and involved.
- ◆ Only change your answer if you are absolutely certain you have answered it incorrectly. Generally, your first choice is the best choice.

E. Essay Questions

- ◆ Read each essay question and start with the easiest one. This will help you gain confidence and will give you time to think about how to answer the harder question(s).
- ◆ Assign time to answer each question depending on how much it is worth. Remember to allow time to plan each answer and to proofread the paper.
- ◆ Underline key words in each question so you are clear as to what is required. Refer back to the question as you are writing your answer to make sure you stay on track.
- ◆ Use brainstorming to come up with an outline for each question. Jot down (in the margin or on the back of a page) words, phrases, ideas and examples, as they pop into your head. Do this as quickly as possible.

PART B WRITING TESTS AND EXAMS

ANSWERING SPECIFIC TYPES OF QUESTIONS

E. Essay Questions (con't)

- ◆ **Number the items in your outline in the order you want to present them. Continue to jot down ideas as they come to you while you are writing your answers.**
- ◆ **Write out your answers according to your outline. Remember that each essay answer should contain an introduction, body, and conclusion or summary:**
 1. **An opening paragraph, introducing the topic and telling the reader what he/she can expect to learn from your essay.**
 2. **Middle paragraph(s) presenting examples, details, evidence and facts to support the points you are making.**
 3. **Final paragraph summarizing the main points, your analysis, etc.**
- ◆ **If you do not know the answer to an essay question, take a few minutes to write down what you can about that subject. You might get partial credit.**
- ◆ **If you do not have enough time to finish an essay question, write a note indicating you ran out of time and briefly list the points you would have covered. You might get partial credit.**

A handout Know the Key Task Words in Short Answer & Essay Questions is available in the Learning Centre, or at <http://www.confederationc.on.ca/academicsupportcentre/learningskills/LearningSkillsResources>

F. Open Book Tests

During an open book test, you must be able to locate information quickly. Put self-stick notes or bookmarks in your textbook to help you find specific information. Also, write down all of the information you know you will need on one sheet of paper.

CONCLUSION

Preparing for and doing well on tests and exams requires a great deal of work. However, the result – success – is worth it!

Go over all returned tests. After your test has been returned to you, go over each question you missed and fill in the correct answer – you may see the same question on the final exam! Check your test after it has been returned to make sure your test was graded correctly.

When preparing for exams, the most important point is to find a system that works for you and stick to it.

When writing exams, it is important to feel confident, comfortable, and as relaxed as possible under the circumstances. This can be attained only through adequate preparation.

<p>Keep in mind that more information on developing study skills is available from the ACADEMIC SUPPORT CENTRE.</p>
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