

Exam Preparation & Question Strategies

Wilfrid Laurier University
Study Skills & Supplemental Instruction Centre

It can be difficult to know where to begin when preparing for exams. This brief workshop will help you to get started. Let's begin.

Exam Format

- ◊ How many questions can you expect?
- ◊ What type of questions?
- ◊ How long will you have to respond?
- ◊ Will marks be deducted for incorrect responses?
- ◊ Can you bring in any aides?

The first step in preparing for exams is to know just what to expect when you walk into the exam room. All of this necessary information should be readily available to you - take a look at any details listed in your course syllabus, and pay close attention to anything that your professor may mention about the format.

Among the information you should have before you set out to study is the number of questions on the test, the percentage of your final grade that the test is worth, the breakdown of question types, whether the exam will be cumulative (if it is your final), the time that you will have to respond, and whether or not you are able to bring in any aides, such as a calculator or a cheat sheet.

If there is anything else you want to know about the upcoming exam, ask your professor. It is likely that they will be willing to offer you any information they can, within reason, and the worst they can do is tell you that they can't respond to a question.

Creating Schedules

Benefits of a Schedule:

- ◊ Use all of the small chunks of time
- ◊ Break up study sessions by topic
- ◊ Set goals for studying
- ◊ Allow yourself enough time to prepare

The first step to preparing for your exams is to set yourself a detailed schedule to help keep yourself on track. A schedule will help you to see all of the free time you have (even when it feels like you don't have any), and will allow you to give yourself enough time to get all of your studying in, and to prioritize your study sessions. Having a schedule can also help you to decrease your stress, by seeing that you do have enough time to get all your studying in. Some things to keep in mind include are the need to set small, achievable goals. Goal setting is the first step in managing your time. Try to schedule blocks of study time that are about 45 minutes to one hour in length. Although we're all different, this is generally the length of time that we can focus on a topic before needing a break.

Not all of your study sessions must be this long, however. Take a look at all of the small chunks of time that you have scattered throughout the day—breaks at work or between classes, the bus ride to school. Don't dismiss these blocks of time. Instead, use them to fit in some extra studying! This is a great time to break out some cue cards.

Finally, switch your topic of study often, so that you are always fresh.

For more information on creating a schedule, or for additional study techniques, review our online workshops on Time Management and Studying

Question Types

Knowledge Questions:

- ❖ Answer fact-based questions.

Concept Questions:

- ❖ Demonstrate in-depth understanding of a concept.

Application Questions:

- ❖ Apply previously learned concepts or theories to new situations.

Now that you have set out a schedule for your study sessions, it's time to start working. In general, all of the questions you'll see on an exam will fall into one of three types: Knowledge, concept or application.

A knowledge question is a straight forward factual question. For example, the question "Who is considered the founding father of psychoanalysis?" would be considered a knowledge question. There is rarely any room to dispute answers to these types of questions, as no interpretation is involved.

A concept question is generally related to a theory, case study or concept. To respond well to these types of questions you need to have a thorough understanding of the theory in question. This means that you should know what the theory states, the support for the theory, and what this theory tries to rule out. For example, "which of the following is not related to the process of elaborative rehearsal?" is a concept question. To answer it correctly, you must know what the process of elaborative rehearsal involves before being able to determine which of the options does not relate to it. These questions are slightly more abstract.

Application questions are often deemed to be the most challenging type for students to respond to. In an application question you are given a scenario that you haven't seen before and are required to apply a previously learned theory or concept to the situation to determine the correct response. These questions are far more abstract than t

he other two, and students are often stumped on them, feeling as though they have never seen the material in question before.

It is important to check with your professor prior to the exam to see which question types they will be including on your exam. If you don't need to know the knowledge questions (the date that a particular experiment was conducted in, for example), then you won't want to spend your time learning these facts.

Multiple Choice

- ✧ READ QUESTIONS CAREFULLY! This is a common error.
- ✧ Circle/underline key words in question.
- ✧ Attempt to answer on your own.
- ✧ Mark any questions you are struggling with and return to them.

- ✧ When/how should you guess?
- ✧ Examine the question for any clues:
 - Absolute terms (never, always), obviously wrong options (decoys), look for similar options (one is likely correct).

You are likely familiar with the multiple choice exam. Although some students feel that they don't need to prepare as well for multiple choice, as the answers are already somewhere on the page, you are probably aware that this might not be the best strategy. You need to know your stuff just as well for a multiple choice exam as you would for an essay exam—possibly even more!

Here are some tips for doing well on a multiple choice exam:

Read each question very carefully. The most common mistake causing lost marks on multiple choice exams are caused by the student mis-reading the question.

Circle or underline the key words in each question. Make sure you know exactly what the question is asking you before you rush ahead to answer it.

After you've read the question carefully, try to answer it on your own. You don't need to spend a great deal of time on this, but see if an answer comes up right away.

When reading through the options, see if any of the responses match your answer. If you weren't sure of the answer, eliminate any obviously wrong choices.

If you don't know the answer, mark off the question, skip to the next one, and make sure that you've allowed yourself enough time to return to those questions that you have skipped. Who knows, a question further down the page may act as a memory trigger, helping you to figure out an earlier problem.

You will likely have to guess on a question here or there. When guessing, make sure that you've gone through the process of eliminating any responses that can't possibly be correct.

Also take the time to look through the question for any clues. Do the answer stems make grammatical sense when paired with the question?

Be on the look out for absolute terms such as "always" or "never". These tend to indicate an incorrect response. It is more likely that the correct response will use words like "often" or "rarely".

Essay Questions

When you are given the questions ahead of time:

- ◊ Resist the urge to write the whole essay.
- ◊ Instead, create an outline.
- ◊ Learn the major points of your outline.
- ◊ Work on remembering a few significant reference to support your points.

When you aren't given the questions ahead of time:

- ◊ Study by constructing possible questions.
- ◊ Identify the major course themes, theoretical perspectives, thinkers, applications.
- ◊ Work on linking these elements together; compare and contrast.

The essay question is intimidating for many students, mainly due to the sheer volume of writing involved, and the fact that we feel like in order to be successful we have to keep an entire essay memorized in our heads! That's a lot of information. It is possible to be successful on essay questions if you allow yourself enough time to prepare. We'll explore two study scenarios: one in which you are given the possible exam questions ahead of time, and another in which you are not.

If you get the questions themselves, or a list of potential questions prior to the exam, don't start out your study session by sitting down to write a full five page essay. Instead, create a detailed outline of how you would respond to each question, and then study the information contained within the major points of your outline. You'll never be able to remember a full essay, and you may frustrate yourself if you find you can't word something the exact same way under pressure as you could during a study session. If you can, it doesn't hurt to try and memorize a couple of good quotes to support your viewpoint as well.

When you get into the exam, spend the first several minutes writing out a point form outline of your major points, as well as your quotes, so that you don't miss a substantial section.

If you don't get the questions prior to the exam, test yourself by trying to create a couple of possible questions. Pay close attention to the major themes that have linked the course together. Keep in mind any significant theories or thinkers that have played

major roles in your course. Try connecting these major theories and themes together. Also try comparing and contrasting different concepts—this is a popular essay style exam question.

When you get into the exam, if you have options about which questions you will respond to, make your selections, and as I mentioned earlier, spend several minutes creating a rough outline. This will help to get your mind warmed up, and to collect your thoughts before you start writing.

As some general rules go, make sure to write legibly; if your professor can't read it, they're not likely to mark it as correct. And leave yourself lots of space, just in case you decide to add something in that you've forgotten.

Short Answer Questions

- ◊ Over study—must know this material very well
- ◊ Keep answers concise.
- ◊ Provide an example or reference to class material.
- ◊ If time is an issue, make point form notes to show your knowledge.

It's very difficult to give tips for responding to short answer questions. Unlike in the essay question, you don't have the time or the space to write out a lengthy response in the hopes that your professor can find some part marks hidden in your paragraphs. And unlike the multiple choice question, you won't find the answer on the page. For these short answer questions, it usually comes down to 'you know it or you don't'.

For this reason, it's in your best interest to over-study for these questions. Just when you think you couldn't possibly spend another moment on the material, and that you'd know it in your sleep, review it again.

If you find that you're running out of time, outline your response in point form, to show your professor that you have the knowledge.

Where applicable, include a small diagram to illustrate your point.

True/False & Matching

- ✧ Read the question carefully!
- ✧ Be on the lookout for qualifiers such as never, or always. These are often incorrect (more so in the humanities than the sciences).
- ✧ Trust your first answer; avoid the temptation to switch responses.

True or false and matching questions are slightly less common, and you may only see a few of these on an exam. As with the multiple choice questions, make sure to read these questions very carefully, as it is common to make simple mistakes due to a reading error. Also as with multiple choice questions, look out for those absolute statements, and qualifying statements.

Practice

- ✧ We all have methods of studying that are familiar to us, and changing these habits can be a challenge.
- ✧ In order to make the most of the information here it is essential that you continually practice new skills.
- ✧ Changing formed habits is not easy, so don't be discouraged if it seems challenging at first—don't give up!

It is not easy to simply start using new study strategies, and it takes time and practise to develop new habits. At first, new study techniques may seem tedious, and you may feel like the time you're spending that task could be put to better use. Rest assured that it takes time to develop all new habits, and after some time you'll find it becomes easier and less of a burden with each passing week.

Don't give up!

Still Have Questions?

For even more help with improving your time management skills, or for advice on other ways to improve your study habits, visit our website:

www.wlu.ca/study

Call to book an appointment: 519.884.0710 ext. 2220

For more assistance, visit our website, stop by the Study Skills Office, or call to book an appointment—you'll be glad you did!