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Revision



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Introduction

An exam is used to demonstrate how well you understand a particular subject and also how well you can function in a time-pressured environment. The type of exams you will sit, the discipline you are studying and your own preferences or learning styles will all affect how you decide to revise. Therefore, it is important to think about your revision style and try new tactics to help you absorb information.

Types of exam

Different types of exams can be testing for different outcomes from you, which may affect how you revise. It is important, therefore, to know the organisation and type of exam you will be sitting before you start to revise.

Some of the most common types of exam are:

Multiple Choice Question (MCQ) exams

These exams are usually based on relatively short questions, often on a fairly wide spread of material. They are often used to check professional competency, core knowledge or attention to detail.

Maths-based exams

How much depth these may go into can depend on your subject area. They may require a high level of maths proficiency and analysis if you are in a technical or maths-based subject, or they may be more focussed on checking your general competency in a specific area of calculations. You

need to take your lead from the amount of depth that the relevant module went into on the maths elements.

Short Answer Question exams

These exams require a more in-depth answer than MCQs, but the answers need to be focussed and structured. They may check your deeper understanding of your learning, and often how it can be applied. Short answer questions may come in 'sets' which focus on a few topics, or range across the module.

Essay-based exams

These are exams in which you are required to answer only a few questions, and give in-depth, detailed answers. It is not a memory test or a chance to see how much information you can regurgitate on paper, but you should have a reasonable understanding of many of its important arguments and be able to provide a convincing evaluation of them. The examiners are looking for a well written discussion or argument on a given topic

that shows you have absorbed enough relevant information to do this.

Where and when do I start?

As soon as possible! A good strategy is to recap and rewrite your work as you progress through the semester. This will make it easier for you when you begin your revision proper. A good time to begin revision is 4 or 5 weeks before the exam itself. This will give you plenty of time and avoid last minute panicking. Good, sensible planning should help you do avoid stress and procrastinating.

Should I revise everything?

It is hard to revise everything in depth, so you need to make a decision on how much to revise based on any guidance your tutor gives you, and also the format of the exam. If you have an MCQ exam, for example, you may want to revise a wide spread on material based mainly on your lecture notes. If,

however, you have an essay-based exam in which you have a choice of question and only answer a couple of questions, you may wish to revise fewer topics in more depth, adding more of your own research. So, if an exam requires you to write on two subjects, then try and revise four (for three subjects you would revise six and so on). This way, you will have a reasonable range of choices when faced with the exam. If you will not have a choice, then you need to be guided by the topics in your module handbook, and what the tutor put the most emphasis on in the module.

Getting going

The following is a list of things to do at the start of your revision period:

1. Go through the module handbook and check the exam rules (number of questions to answer; can you repeat subjects already written about).
2. Review the module for the overall topics to revise – decide which ones are the best (you may not have to revise the whole module).
3. Get all your notes together for the module.
4. Get copies of past papers from the Library website.
5. Gather any books, journals, web-pages, articles, etc. you have from the module.

Planning

Create a plan in your online or paper diary or on a spreadsheet to help you visualize how much time you actually have in the week to revise. You should also put the date and time of the exam in your diary as soon as you have it. There are also lots of apps to help you plan and stay on top of your revision schedule. Do not forget to plan time for other things such as social activities, family, work, and other commitments.

To help avoid procrastination, you really need to set yourself some sensible goals. Think about what time you have available, and set yourself a defined goal that you can achieve within those periods.

These may get more defined as you progress through your revision. For example, goals near the start of revision may be something like 'Summarize first three lectures and seminars' and by the end of revision may be 'Complete past exam question under exam conditions.'

How not to get bored

The trick to revision is to use more than one strategy to give yourself some variation on how you are revising. It is better to revise 'actively' (giving your brain something to do with the information) than revise 'passively' (just reading things through). This should make revision less boring, as well as helping you remember material!

You can try the following:

1. Using colour coded highlighters or sticky notes to draw your attention to main themes or topics and key words in your notes.
2. Summarise your notes. Then, when you are confident with the material, summarise again, until you have a set of cue cards or one A4 crib sheet per topic.
3. Use spider diagrams (or mind maps), timelines, pros and cons lists or any other kind of diagrammatical note-taking.

techniques to see the information in a different, condensed way.

4. Create flash cards, small cards with information on one side and a question or key word on the reverse. You can also create digital flashcards using a flashcard app for use on mobile devices.
5. Practice doing exam questions from past papers under exam conditions.
6. If there are 'facts' or 'figures' you need to memorise, try writing them on sticky notes and leaving them in places you see them all the time (e.g. your kitchen cupboard or by your mirror).
7. Try making up exam questions (although do be careful not just to make up ones which you'd like to answer!). This helps to put yourself in the mind-set of your tutors. If you were them, what would you test student on?

What about study groups?

Study groups can help the revision process, and they certainly help to stop you getting bored, but do not rely on them too much. It may help to exchange practical experience of other people's exams to see where they have either had problems or developed valuable strategies. If you can get together with a small number of students who are all revising the same topics, then a group discussion can bring out points that you may not have thought of. Be careful though: always make sure of the validity of information before planting it thoroughly in your brain. Before you meet it is useful to have a clear idea of what you will be working on and what materials you need to bring.

Is one read-through enough?

The simple answer is no. It is the repeated reviewing of the material which helps you to remember it, and also to identify areas you are struggling to remember or understand. You need to carry out several complete read-throughs of your notes. What you should have is a clear, accessible content such as flash cards or essay plans in note form. You may have spider-grams or crib sheets of some of the topics too. You should practice past exam questions, and after you have completed them, go back to your notes to check if there were any gaps in your answer or improvements you could have made.

Further reading

For more help and tips on what to do in the exam, we also have the Study Basics Guide Approaching Exams and a range of videos on the Skills for Learning website.

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