

Exam Technique

Exams test your knowledge and understanding of your subject, and also your problem-solving skills under time constraint. But if that were all, then perhaps they wouldn't be quite such a stressful experience! Exams also test a set of skills commonly known as 'exam technique', which are in some ways nothing to do with your learning of the subject matter but can still make the difference between pass and fail. There's quite a lot of mystique around exam technique, as if there were some kind of arcane magic trick or secret password that would unlock higher levels of performance.

Actually, a lot of 'exam technique' is plain common sense, which can be a bit deflating until you realise that these skills really do make or break exam performance regardless of how much revision has been done – and that common sense is not exactly in great supply in stressful situations!

Time management

Time management is the most obvious aspect of exam technique. Coursework has to be completed to a deadline of course, but the time pressure in exams is rather more acute! Time management in exams involves making sensible decisions about how to realistically divide up the time you have and keeping an eye on the clock. You could think of it as a calculation:

- How much time do you have in total?
- How many questions do you have to do?
- How many marks are they worth?*
- Subtract 10 mins at the beginning for reading the paper and planning your approach (including for this calculation).
- Subtract time at the end (15 mins?) for reading through and checking all your answers, and to accommodate 'slippage' if questions take longer than expected.
- Divide the remaining time by the number of questions (*adjusting for marking weight.) Factor in experience from doing past papers about how much you can expect to write in that time.
- Split the time per question into three – some time for reading the question and planning, the bulk of it on writing, and a little time for checking.

Now there's a plan, you need to keep an eye on progress. If an exam consists of two questions and you accidentally let time run away with you and spend all your time on one question, no matter how perfect an answer it is, you can still only get 50% of the mark.

Don't worry if the plan goes a little astray, though, and don't feel you have to stick to it rigidly – if you get stuck on a question or haven't finished it within the planned time, leave it and come back to it. It's just there to make sure you give yourself the opportunity to shine equally in all the questions.

Read the rubric and questions

Reading the exam ‘rubric’ (instructions) and the questions very carefully is the second factor which can have a major impact on exams. An exam question isn’t asking for everything you know on a topic – it’s asking you to do something very specific with your knowledge. A student might write the fullest, most accurate and intelligent answer ever, but if it’s not the answer to the question that’s set, then it’s not going to do well.

Similarly, if a student answers all the questions, only to realise that they were only supposed to choose three out of them, then it’s going to harm their marks on the three questions that count, and certainly won’t win them any extra points!

Planning

Planning is a related skill – the ability to plan the time and also plan the answers, on paper or in your head, however briefly, to make sure that it’s well-structured and isn’t going off on a tangent. The structure of an exam answer isn’t going to be as elaborate or polished as a piece of coursework, but it should still give a logical direction to the argument or answer.

Tactics

Related to both reading the exam paper and planning is the issue of **tactics**. Which questions will you answer first? Would it be better to go for the one you find easier or quicker to answer, to make a good start? How much more time should you give to questions which have higher marks, or how much information should you give if there aren’t many marks available? Tactical decisions like this, based on the information in the exam paper itself, can help boost your confidence, make best use of your time and energy, and also get a significant proportion of the marks under your belt early on.

Presentation

Good presentation matters too – of course, you’re handwriting (or typing) at speed, without much time or possibility to tidy up mistakes, so your answer isn’t going to be – and doesn’t need to be – a thing of calligraphic beauty. However, it does need to be legible. Many of us don’t actually do much handwriting on a daily basis anymore, so simply building up the strength in your hand through writing more in the weeks coming up to the exam will help.

The odd typo if you’re doing the exam online is not going to impair your answer, but it still needs to be clear what you mean, and readable overall. Your answer paper also needs to be easily followed if you have edited anything in or changed the structure on re-reading it, so if you have changed anything, arrows, asterisks, crossings-out, numbering etc can help. You can usually answer the questions in any order, and sometimes there may be a choice of question. Clearly mark your answer

paper so the examiner knows which question they're marking! Remember to give a clear indication of the material you want them to mark, too – you can use the answer paper to scribble plans, and you may edit what you've written – but remember to cross it out.

Personal Organisation

Finally – **personal organisation counts**. The ability to get yourself to the right exam room, at the right time, on the right day and with the right equipment is essential! Double check, even if you think you remember what exams are when and where. And do get a good night's sleep before the exam - being able to think clearly on the day will help you more than anything you could have learned by staying up late.

All of these things are common sense, and probably there's nothing here which you didn't sort of already know. But every year, students do make unnecessary mistakes due to poor exam technique, and their learning doesn't appear to the best advantage. Exams can be stressful events, and common sense isn't easy to hang onto!