

Exam day tips

How to perform successfully on exam day

To prepare well for exams you need to manage your academic workload throughout semester and revise early and effectively. However, even well prepared students can feel uneasy as exam days approach.

This flyer gives a number of tips to ensure you feel in control and perform at your best – despite the stresses of exams.

Get prepared

Two to three weeks before the start of exams:

- Check the [latest exam timetable](#) for the date, time, room and what can be taken into each exam (e.g. calculators, notes, etc.). Note any last minute changes.
- Review **old exam papers**. Get to know the format, types of questions and scope of topics covered. Ask your lecturers about the availability of these.
- Attend **exam revision lectures** and take special note of any tips that your lecturers might give. Find out about any exam hurdle requirements.
- **Practise answering exam questions** within the time limits and under similar conditions as you will experience in the exam.
- Practise some **stress management** and/or relaxation techniques (check out these [tips from Counselling and Psychological services](#))
- Consult **Student Equity and Disability Support [SEDS]** about alternative exam arrangements as early as possible if you have a disability or ongoing medical condition. Go to: <https://services.unimelb.edu.au/student-equity/home>
- Apply for **Special Consideration** if you have experienced exceptional circumstances that you believe will affect your exam performance. More information here: <https://students.unimelb.edu.au/admin/special-consideration>

During Swot Vac

In order to work effectively during Swot Vac decide what you need to get done, make yourself a revision timetable and stick to it. Make sure your revision is task focused and not too general in scope.

If you find that you're distracted or lacking motivation, working with other students studying the same subject can be an effective way of revising.

However, don't burn yourself out before the exams have even started. Pay attention to your diet, drink lots of water, exercise and, above all, try to get *at least* 7 hours sleep each night.

Also, when studying throughout Swot Vac, be mindful of the times of your exams. It is worth trying to concentrate and be alert at those times of day. For example, be aware that you will not perform well in a 9am exam if throughout Swot Vac you have been studying until late at night, falling into bed at 4am and getting up around noon.

The night before the exam

Don't spend the night before an exam trying to cram in more or new information. At this stage, it's best just to work with the exam notes or flash cards you have made during revision sessions.

- List or recite the main points on a topic and then check your recall against your notes.
- Look over your essay plans, formulae and/or any memory aids you have devised.
- Pack your bag for the next day, eat a good meal and try to get a good night's sleep.

If you feel anxious about the limits of your knowledge, remind yourself that you will earn more marks by being refreshed and alert in the exam than by trying to cram another topic into your short-term memory. Often short-term cramming does not work. It's better to know well what you have learned over the longer term than to panic and exhaust yourself at the last minute.

On exam day

Allow plenty of time in the morning to get yourself ready to leave on time for the exam. Have a healthy meal; preferably with protein and complex carbohydrates (low GI) that will provide slow energy release over several hours. Take fruit bars with you to sustain you through a 3-hour exam.

Dress appropriately for the weather and remember that exam rooms can sometimes be a little extreme in temperature, so be prepared. Make sure you take your student card and appropriate writing instruments (pens, pencils, ruler, eraser, etc.).

Arrive in good time but don't talk too much with other students about the topics or the exam. This may confuse you and will certainly contribute to exam anxieties. Perhaps talk about what you might all do after the exam. Moving your fingers and toes will keep muscles loose; deep breathing can reduce anxiety and chewing gum can help to prevent tension.

During reading time

Get an overview of the entire paper by scanning through it first. **Read** the instructions **VERY** carefully and work out how many questions you need to answer.

Calculate the time you can spend on each answer relative to its mark value. For example, if question 1 is worth 20% of the marks for a 3-hour paper, should spend about 35 minutes on it. Allow yourself 10-15 minutes review time for the end.

Decide which questions are the best ones to attempt. Skim the paper again and tick any questions you feel you could attempt. Then go back and read these carefully.

Decide the order in which you will respond. The general rule is to attempt the ones worth most marks reasonably early. You could also start with what seems easiest to you. Leave the ones you are least sure about until last; you may get some ideas about them along the way.

Carefully, **analyse the questions** you will attempt. Ask: What **exactly** is the question asking? Can it be broken down into parts? Can I restate it in simpler terms? How does it relate to the semester's work? What information is provided? Are there any clues elsewhere in the paper?

During writing time

As soon as you can, **write a few things down**:

- List, in order, the questions you will attempt.
- Write your time allowance per question.
- Write out formulae, key terms, lists or plans you have memorised and note which questions you will apply them to.

Re-read your question and plan your answer. Don't rush or feel you have to begin straight away. Some students prefer to **write a brief outline** of their planned response for each question before they begin writing detailed responses. This may help if you know your concentration wanes over time. Also, if you have a mental blank later, you have your outline to refer to.

Stick to your allocated time for each answer – if you get stuck, move on. If, despite your best efforts, you run out of time, jot down notes on how you would have proceeded to solve the problem or answer the question. Point form is fine at this stage.

If you have no idea of the answer, **don't leave a blank**. Write down *anything* you can think of related to the question.

Tips for maximising your marks in the exam

- Avoid spending too long on difficult questions for which your answer may or may not be correct. You may run out of time to answer the questions you are more confident about.
- Be sure to answer the question asked. Answers unrelated to the question will earn ZERO marks.
- Answer **all** parts of the question. Be aware that essay or short answer questions can contain parts. For example, *'How and why are contemporary romantic films different from those of the classic Hollywood period?'* Discuss **both** 'How' and 'why'.
- Try to identify how marks have been allocated. For example, if you are asked to explain 4 causes of heart disease and the question is worth 20 marks, it is likely that 5 marks are available for each part.
- Make sure your writing is legible. Examiners are under time constraints. If they struggle to read your writing, you may not get all the marks you deserve.
- For mathematical or scientific calculations, check your responses carefully. For written responses check that your ideas are clear and on target. Don't lose 'easy' marks for leaving out a key word or a decimal point.

After the exam

Some students enjoy talking with others about their answers to exam questions. Beware – this may increase *your* exam anxiety. Nothing you do after the exam will change your mark for that exam, so *don't dwell on it*. Do something you know you will enjoy right after an exam.

After you've had a break, however, it's worth reviewing your performance. The aim is not to agonise over 'what you could have done', but rather to identify where you could improve your results next time. Reflect:

- Were you sufficiently prepared?
- Which areas of exam revision could you improve?
- Was stress management an issue?
- Did you manage your time in the exam effectively?

Also, after the exams have been marked, it may be useful to work with a tutor, other students or an Academic Skills Adviser to identify where you could have gained extra marks.

What will your exam strategy be next time?

Further Resources

For more information on what to do on exam day: <https://students.unimelb.edu.au/admin/what-to-do-on-exam-day>

Academic Skills