

STUDYING FOR EXAMINATIONS



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Learning Objectives

This module will provide you with some guidelines and strategies to help you prepare for exams at university. The topics covered within this module include:

- preparation for studying
- planning your study sessions
- summarising and studying subject content
- exam techniques for:
 - essay exams
 - short answer exams
 - multiple choice exams

1. Some basic guidelines

Studying efficiently requires organisation of time and resources. Ideally, you should begin studying about four weeks before your exams. Draw up a study planner and use it to help you to organise your time.

The following points are a general set of guidelines to help you prepare for exams.

Organise the material you need to study

Do this by gathering together all your lecture and tutorial notes. Make sure these correspond to your course outline and divide your notes into the topics covered each week during the semester. Once you have organised all your material you are ready to choose which topics you need to study for the exam.

For essay exams: Find out how many questions you have to answer. If, for example, you have to answer four questions, choose and study four in detail and one or two extra as backup topics.

For multiple choice exams: Multiple choice exams will usually only cover what has been discussed in the lectures and tutorials. Use the course outline as a framework for study. Look for the main ideas and concepts covered in each week of lectures and tutorials and then find details to support them. Use flash cards to help you memorise the information. (You can make your own flash cards, or buy packs of small, lined cardboard cards available at stationery shops). On your flash cards write down definitions, main ideas and supporting information.

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Use the flash cards to help you remember the significant information. You can carry them with you and study them when you are travelling by bus or train.

For short answer examinations: Prepare for short answer examinations as you would for a multiple choice exam, but practise writing out short answers to questions. Concentrate on giving the answer in the first sentence and then using details and facts to illustrate your understanding. Remember to keep it short, or you will waste precious time during the exam.

Draw up a study planner

Use the study planner provided in this unit, or design your own to help you organise your time leading up to the examinations. Blank out the times when you are at lectures or working. The time you have left is the time you have for planning study sessions. Issues to remember are whether you are more alert in the morning or evening. Schedule study times that suit your personal rhythms. Schedule time off from study as well; this will help you manage the stress of studying and help keep you fresh and alert. Also, you should take into consideration whether you want to devote a solid week to a subject or to include variety in your study schedule.

Prioritise the hardest subjects

You may need to spend more time studying the subjects you find most difficult.

Make a study area

Choose a quiet place for study where you won't be easily distracted. Always study in the same place. Make sure you have good lighting. Don't try to study the entire course in one sitting! Divide the subject up into topics that you need to know for the exam. For example: *In this study period I will look at the reasons for the American Civil War.*

Set study goals

Set yourself a goal for each study session. This will help you keep track of what you are learning. Write your goals down as soon as you begin your study session, or set them at the end of the study session for next time. This will set up a framework for beginning the next session quickly and help avoid procrastination.

Examples of study goals might be:

- I will read through and summarise chapters 3 and 4.
- I will work through 5 equations.
- I will learn the main concepts that were discussed in lectures from weeks 1-3.

Set study periods

Don't study for longer than 50 minutes at a time. It is better to study for a short intense period of time with sustained concentration than long periods of time when you are tired and not really engaging with the study material.

Use the SQ3R method of study:

- **survey:** Before you begin to study, survey the material to get an idea of what it is about. Look at tables of contents, possible chapter summaries, graphs and tables. Skim through lecture notes to get a picture of the main ideas.
- **read:** Read through the material once without making notes. On your second reading, make notes of the main ideas.
- **recall:** With the book shut, try to recall what you have read. Make notes of what you remember and check their accuracy against your study material.
- **review:** Review all your notes at the end of the study period. This is an important part of the study process because it can prevent you from forgetting what you have learnt. You can also try summarising your notes down to key words that will act as memory triggers for related ideas. Also, set review times separately from your study times. Read through your review notes and then try reciting them back.

Review old exam papers

Reviewing previous exam papers can be very helpful. To do this, get hold of old exam papers (generally available from the library), and work through them. Look at how they fit into the course. Look at the wording of the questions and familiarise yourself with the clue words (see section 5 on clue words). Practise doing the papers under exam conditions and carefully review your answers. Also, if you are unsure about what you need to study, or have questions about the exam format, speak to your lecturer or tutor.

Form a study group

Get together with other students to look at practice exams and to give each other feedback. Try explaining the main ideas and arguments in the subject to each other. Research has shown that this is a very effective way of improving your understanding of course content.

For more detailed information on writing essay exams, multiple choice exams, and exam clue words, see the other sections in this unit.

References for further reading

Neil Burdess, *The Handbook of Student Skills*, Prentice Hall, New York, 1991.

Richard Freedman, *Mastering Study Skills*, Macmillan, London, 1991.

Adopted from: Beisler, Scheeres and Pinner, *Communications Skills*, Pitman Publishing, Sydney, 1987.

2. Study planner

Use the study planner on the following page, or design your own, to help you organise your time leading up to the examinations. Blank out the times when you are at lectures or working. The time you have left is the time you have for planning study sessions. Issues to remember are whether

you are more alert in the morning or evening. Schedule study times that suit your personal rhythms. Make sure you schedule time off from study as well; this will help you manage the stress of studying and help keep you fresh and alert.

3. Writing summaries

Generally, exam questions are designed to test your understanding of the course contents rather than to test your ability to memorise lectures and textbooks. Since this is the case, it is important that you aim to *understand* your course materials when preparing for exams rather than just to memorise them. Andrew Northedge in *The Good Study Guide* (1990), tells students that trying to memorise course notes is a complete waste of time and effort. If you do this, he warns, your brain will switch off in protest! Preparing for exams is a constructive process, which involves you identifying key points, and trying to work out what questions you might be asked. Any 'memorising' should come towards the end of your preparation and this will be based on your summaries (ibid).

Useful stages of summarising

- Make very condensed notes from various sources such as your lecture notes, textbooks, photocopies of articles, handouts etc., that you have gathered together for revision of your topic.
- Then extract the main points from these condensed notes to produce a single *summary sheet* of headings with key points, names, etc. for that topic.
- Finally, having done this for the topics within a given section of the course, take the main headings from all the topic summary sheets and produce a single *master summary sheet* which outlines the main subject matter for that whole section of the course.

(these points are from Northedge, ibid.).

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
8.00							
9.00							
10.00							
11.00							
12.00							
1.00							
2.00							
3.00							
4.00							
5.00							
6.00							
7.00 and evenings							

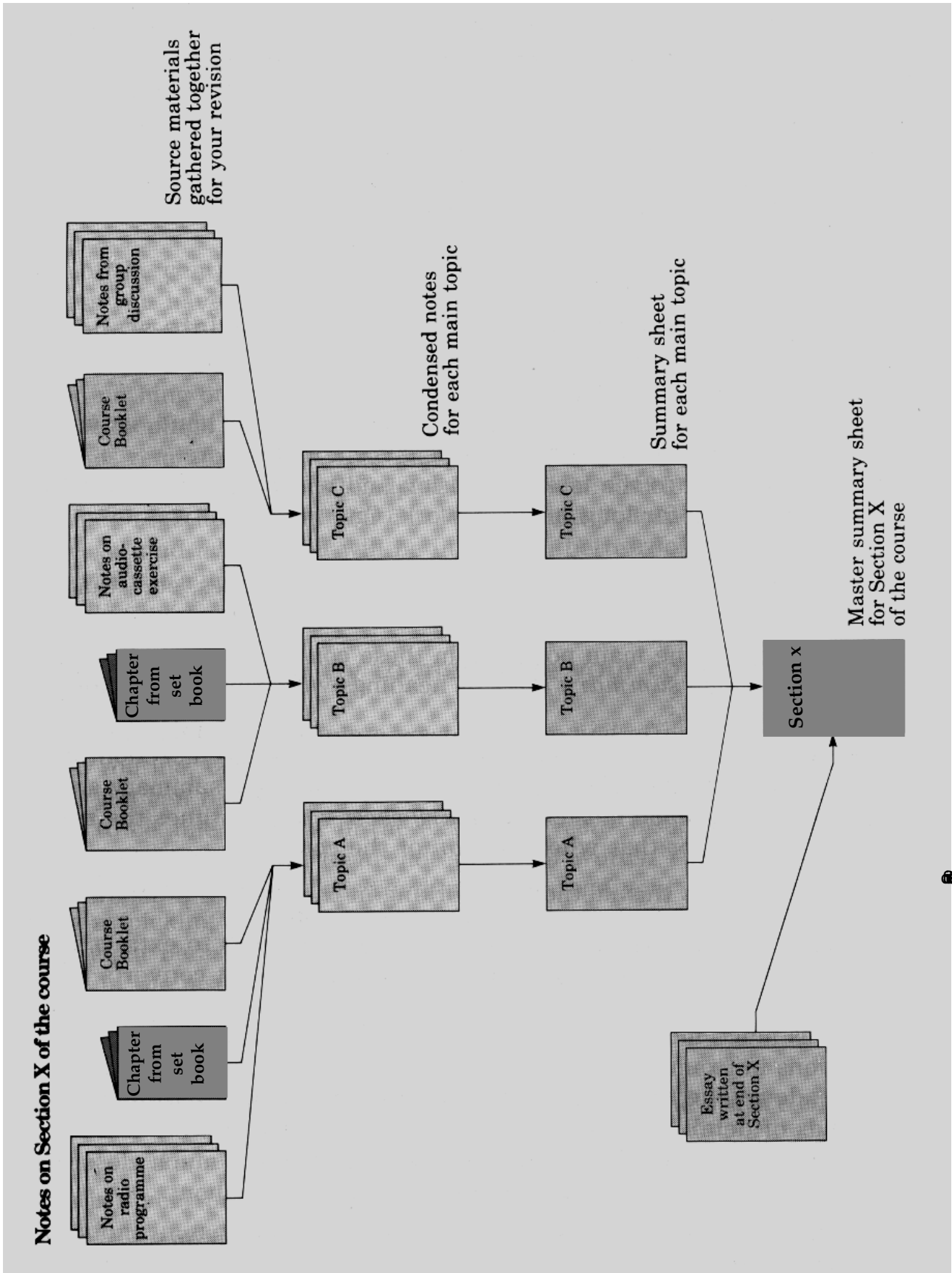


Illustration of the process of condensing notes from a range of sources on to a single sheet
 (Source: Northedge, A. 1990 p. 222)

When writing summaries it is very tempting to note down the page number of the article or text book and simply *copy* the material directly into your notebook. After all, the writer of the article or text book is no doubt an expert in the field, so why not copy his or her words? There are several problems with this approach. One obvious problem is you risk plagiarising the material, and while you should still provide references for your sources when summarising, this is not expected to the same extent under exam conditions. Another very significant problem with the copying approach is that you fail to engage with the material: writing a summary of the material forces you to ensure that you understand the text. What's more, summarising relevant information helps you save time; that is, you won't waste your time copying out long passages from the original.

If you find that you fall into the trap of copying out sections from your sources rather than summarising, you could try the following steps when writing summaries.

- Quickly read through the text to see whether it is relevant to your topic; if you are working with a photocopy or your own source, you may want to underline or highlight the main points as you read.
Never do this with borrowed material!
- Read the text again, making a note of the main points.
- Put away the original and rewrite the notes in your own words.
- Begin your summary:
 - restate the main idea at the beginning of your summary, indicating your source;
 - mention other major points;
 - if necessary, change the order of the points to make construction more logical;

- Re-read your summary to check that you have included all the important information and that it is expressed in clear, simple sentences.

Needless to say, writing summaries is a constructive process which requires a lot of hard work. However, for exam preparation it is a valuable activity as it reduces your course content down to the essentials, and as Northedge points out, you won't have time in exams to wade through mounds of detail in your mind trying to sift out an answer. Your condensed version of the main points of the course is much closer to what you will have time to think through and write about (Northedge, *ibid*).

Reference

Northedge A (1990) *The Good Study Guide*, Open University, Milton Keynes, Chapter 7: Preparing for Examinations.

Sample summary

The summary below uses headings, a numbering system, underlining, and point form to note down the important facts from the text. Even though this is a straightforward text, you can see that the writer not only writes down the facts (types of solids) but draws out a key concept, that is, the behaviour of atoms, then uses this to explain the differences between the types of matter.

Sample text	Summary
<p>All matter may be classified as either solid, liquid or gas. Solids are firm and have a definite form. Rubber, wood, glass, iron, cotton, and sand are all classified as solids. As the atoms or molecules of a solid are densely packed, and as they have very little freedom of movement, most solids require a considerable force in order to change their shape or volume.</p> <p>Solids may be further divided into two classes: crystalline and amorphous. Crystalline solids include rocks, wood, paper and cotton. These solids are made up of atoms arranged in a definite pattern. When they are heated, the change to a liquid, known as melting, is sharp and clear. Amorphous solids include rubber, glass and sulphur. In these substances the pattern of the atoms is not orderly, and when they are heated, they gradually soften.</p> <p>Liquids, on the other hand, are not rigid. If water, milk, or oil is poured on a table, it will flow all over the surface. The atoms or molecules of liquids attract each other and thereby enable liquids to flow. However, these atoms are loosely structured and they do not keep their shape. Therefore, a liquid will take the shape of any container in which it is poured.</p> <p>Gases, such as air, oxygen, and carbon dioxide, have no fixed shape or volume of their own. They diffuse as they spread out to fill any container. If water is put into a tyre, it will run to the bottom; if air is put into a tyre, it fills the whole space inside. The atoms or molecules of gases are widely spaced and move very rapidly. They therefore expand or compress to fit any area.</p>	<p>What is matter?</p> <p><i>either 1. <u>solid</u>. 2. <u>liquid</u>. or 3. <u>gas</u>.</i></p> <p><i>1. <u>Solids</u></i> <i>atoms densely packed SO they can't move THEREFORE can't change shape without force</i></p> <p>Two classes of solids:</p> <p><i>i) Chrystalline: examples: rock, wood, paper, cotton. When heated, change to clear liquid</i></p> <p><i>ii) Amorphous: examples: rubber, glass, sulphur. Atoms not orderly, SO when heated they soften (different to chrystalline)</i></p> <p><i>2. <u>Liquids</u></i> <i>unlike solids - not rigid Atoms of l. attract each other, AS A RESULT liquids flow. Also, atoms loosely structured, so liquids change shape.</i></p> <p><i>3. <u>Gases</u> eg. oxygen carbon dioxide no fixed shape so can diffuse-spread out Atoms of g. widely spaced, move rapidly SO can expand to fill areas.</i></p>

Adapted from F. Zimmerman *English for Science*, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1989.

4. Writing essay examinations

Essay exams are designed to test your ability to synthesize information and to organise your thoughts on paper. Before the exam:

- Make sure you know the time, place and materials required for the exam.
- Arrive with enough time to find your seat and make yourself comfortable.
- Try to stay calm and alert.
- Avoid conversations with other students about how little study you may have done or how panicky you may be feeling.

The following points are designed to help you prepare for essay style examinations.

Be familiar with the terminology used in essay exam questions

See section 5 in this unit: **Examination Clue Words**. Make sure you know exactly what is being asked of you. Terms like 'compare', 'trace', 'illustrate' and 'evaluate' all have different meanings and will require a different interpretation of the question.

Take time to read the exam paper thoroughly

Make sure you read each question carefully and are sure you understand what it is asking. A common mistake made in essay exams is not understanding exactly what the question wants you to answer. Spend the first 5 minutes reading the paper thoroughly.

If the question is ambiguous, unclear or too broad, make clear your interpretation before answering. You would normally indicate this in the introduction to your essay.

Before writing, jot down all your ideas and organise them into an essay outline

You can do this on the exam paper itself, or on any spare paper you have with you. Don't write your essay off the top of your head, as it is likely to end up disorganised and incoherent. Also, if you have jotted down ideas and keywords and you have a mental blank during the exam, you will be able to refer to these and keep writing quickly.

Always indicate the number of the essay

You don't have to answer the essay questions in the order in which they appear in the exam paper. Start with the easiest one and do the hardest last. This approach reduces anxiety and can facilitate clear thinking. However, if you do write your answers out of sequence, make sure you indicate clearly which question you are answering.

Make sure you time yourself on each question

Another common mistake made in essay exams is running out of time. If you follow the point above, you may find you have more time for the harder essay.

Always give your answer in the first sentence

A good technique is to use the wording of the question in your answer.

For example:

How do the goals of liberal and socialist feminism differ?

You could begin your essay with:

The goals of liberal and socialist feminism differ in three main ways...

This approach makes sure you answer the question, and it also makes the exam easier to mark.

Make sure you structure your essay in three parts: Introduction, Body, Conclusion

The function of these sections is as follows.

An **Introduction** explicitly states your answer and the organisation of the essay. For example:

The goals of liberal and socialist feminism differ in three main ways. The first is that..., The second is... and the third main area of difference lies in the... This essay will argue that although these differences exist in approaches, the practices of liberal and socialist feminism have become very similar.

The **Body of your essay** should include supporting material with names, dates and appropriate details to your answer. Make sure you structure the body of the essay as you indicated in your introduction. Use transitions to tie your ideas together. This will make your essay flow. If you feel you are losing the plot, go back and re-read the question and your introduction.

In your **Conclusion**, re-state your answer to the question and refer briefly to your main points in the body. Show HOW you have answered the question. For example:

In conclusion, it is clear that although liberal and socialist feminists originally held differing views on how to attain their goals, a realistic assessment now shows that their practice has become very similar. This is most clearly illustrated by...(give your best example and end the essay).

Leave space in between answers in case you have time to add any information you didn't include in your essays.

If you run out of time, answer in point form. Markers will often give you some marks for this. However, only do this if you run out of time.

Try to write as legibly as possible

If you have very messy handwriting, try printing or writing on every second line.

If you have time at the end of the exam, proof read your essay for grammatical mistakes and spelling errors.

Sample exam essay plan

Note while the essay plan below is simplistic, it has been included to show you how an essay answer can be mapped out before you start writing.

Question: *how do the goals of liberal and social feminism differ?*

Plan

Introduction: differs in three main ways
although goals differ in approaches,
practices are similar

Body: differs in first main way
second main way
third way
HOWEVER similar practices

Conclusion: re-state thesis in intro.

5. Identifying examination clue words

In essay exams, every question contains a **clue word**. Clue words are the words that the lecturer uses to indicate what angle he or she wants you to take when answering the question. Clue words tell you exactly what to do in your essay, so they are extremely important in essay exams.

An essay exam is like a mental game in which the lecturers tell you what they want. To play the game successfully you need to be aware of the precise meanings of the clue words in the questions. Once you have found the clue words and worked out exactly what they mean, you can answer the question as clearly as possible.

For example:

Compare the goals of liberal and socialist feminism.

The clue word in this question is **compare**.

If the question asked you to *Evaluate the goals of...*, it would require a completely different answer.

On the following page is a list of the most common clue words and their meanings in exam questions to help you prepare for essay exams. Because the list is long, it is a good idea to read through past exam papers to familiarise yourself with the most commonly used clue words in your discipline. Many departments have past exam papers in the library.

Clue Word	Meaning
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Analyse	To find the main ideas, how they are related and why they are important.
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Comment on	To discuss, criticise, or explain the meaning of something as completely as possible.
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Compare	To show both the differences and the similarities.
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Contrast	To compare by showing the differences.
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Criticise	To give your judgement or reasoned opinion of something, showing its good and bad points. It is not necessary to attack it.
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Define	To give the formal meaning by distinguishing it from related terms. This is often a matter of giving a memorised definition.
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Describe	To write a detailed account or verbal picture in a logical sequence.
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Diagram	To make a graph, chart or drawing. Be sure to label it and add a brief explanation if necessary.
----------------	--

Discuss	To describe, giving the details and explaining the positives and negatives of it.
----------------	---

Enumerate	To list. Name and list the main ideas one by one.
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Evaluate	To give your opinion or some expert's opinion of the truth or importance of the concept. Show the advantages and disadvantages.
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Illustrate	To explain or make clear by concrete examples, comparisons or analogies.
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Interpret	To give the meaning using examples and personal comments to make it clear.
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Justify	To give a statement of why you think it is so. Give reasons for your statement or conclusion.
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List	To produce a list of words, sentences or comments. Same as enumerate.
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Outline	To give a general summary. It should contain a series of main ideas supported by secondary facts. Show the organisation of the idea.
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Prove	To show by argument or logic that it is true. The word 'prove' has a very special meaning in maths and physics.
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Relate	To show the connection between things, telling how one causes or is like another.
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Review	To give a survey or summary in which you look at the important parts and criticise if necessary.
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State	To describe the main points in precise terms. Use brief, clear sentences.
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Summarise	To give a brief, condensed account of the main ideas.
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Trace	To follow the progress or history of the subject.
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6. Studying for multiple choice examinations

Multiple choice or objective exams are based on your ability to recognise facts. There are different styles of objective tests:

- *multiple choice*
- *true-false*
- *matching and sentence completion.*

Before the exam:

- Make sure you know the time, place and materials required for the exam.
- Arrive with enough time to find your seat and get comfortable. Try to stay calm and alert.
- Avoid conversations with other students about how little study you have done, or how panicky you may be feeling.

The following points will help you prepare for objective tests:

Make sure you know which areas of your course will be included in the test.

Ask your lecturer/tutor if there is a penalty for guessing

If there is, only guess if you feel there is a good chance of getting the answer right.

Read directions carefully and listen for any oral directions or corrections.

Read quickly through the test to plan your time and to check that your test is complete and correctly collated.

Try to supply your own answer before reading the choices provided

When using a separate answer sheet, keep it to the right of, and close to the test booklet; check frequently that you are answering in the properly numbered space.

Answer the easy questions first

Go back and do the hard ones later. Try not to get stuck on a hard question because you will waste time and cause yourself anxiety.

Read each question carefully

In objective tests the wording of the question and potential answers can be tricky. Consider all the options before choosing your answer, even if the first option seems correct. This is important when you have to choose the “best” answer in some multiple choice exams.

On multiple choice questions, be alert for grammatical inconsistencies between the question and the potential answers. A choice is nearly always wrong if the question and the answer don’t make a grammatically correct sentence.

Be aware of the wording used in objective tests

The following words are commonly used in true-false questions:

all	most	some	no
always	usually	sometimes	never
great	much	either	no
more	equal	less	
bad	good	is	is not

On true-false questions, be alert for qualifying words such as: *all*, *none*, *always* and *never*, which generally make a statement **false**; and *most*, *some*, *usually* and *seldom*, which tend to make a statement **true**.

In true-false tests, be alert for multiple ideas or concepts within the question. All parts of the statement must be true or the entire statement is false. If you really can't make a perfect match between the question and the answer, choose the alternative that is more nearly true than the other choices.

Accept the question at face value

Don't read anything in or out of the question. Reading too much into a question usually results in a wrong answer.

Do not change your original answer

In most cases your intuition is correct. Only change your answer if you have a very strong hunch that it's wrong, or you find new evidence.

7. On the big day

To conclude this unit on studying for examinations here are some suggestions on what to do once inside the examination room:

- Don't panic when you read exam questions. Almost every exam question is linked with something covered in the course. You just have to work out the link.
- Time in exams is a crucial factor: you need to have a very clear plan of how you intend to use your time. You will be able to work quickly if you have prepared well and if you plan your answers so that you know what is coming next in your argument.
- Have a time plan for the exam. That is, divide the time available by the number of questions allowing time at the end to check your answers. If the questions are worth different amounts you should also allow more time for the questions worth more marks.
- Scan through the paper finding questions you have prepared for.
- Answer your best question first.
- Start roughing out answers as soon as possible if this will help to "unfreeze" you.
- Leave a space after each question so that you have the space to say more if you have left something out, or if you have time left over.
- Don't run wildly over your deadlines: you will not earn enough extra marks in a question to compensate for not adequately covering another question.
- Do your best to write legibly. Remember to only use point form when you are halfway through a question and have almost run out of time. But don't run out of time!

