

12 Examination preparation

A note to readers. It is suggested that you increase magnification to 125% or 150% to read the guide on screen. Click on the magnifying glass icon at bottom left of the screen and select your magnification.

Key points in Chapter 12

- Start exam preparation early and pace yourself.
- Write summary sheets.
- Develop your long-term memory.
- Ensure you have a full complement of learned information with which you can demonstrate your essay answer skills.
- Apply learned information to past questions.
- Adapt prepared judgements and collected supporting evidence to answer questions in the exam.

THERE IS INCREASING VARIATION in the scheduling of exams. The following comments apply to preparation for end-of-unit, end-of-year and end-of-course examinations.

Students are seldom surprised by their grade

Very few students are surprised by their exam grade because they have received feedback and comment from their teachers throughout their work. The grade is a reflection of your skills, incrementally developed, your work on the content of your course and your understanding which you developed, month by month, over the course. What is particular about the end of year and, particularly, the final exam is the concentration of assessment in timed conditions, over a few days, of a substantial part of the course. This requires the student to have more memorised information and to write a number of answers at speed. There are particular procedures to prepare for this.

There need be nothing daunting about exams. The best way to think about them is to see them as an opportunity - in which you can demonstrate the skills you have developed and your interest in, and understanding of, the past. You cannot deny they are a test, and with



your end of course exams, a test with a degree of finality, but all work can be seen as a test. Finals are only a test like any other assignment or like the end of year exams. The difference is the size of the test, but a programme of preparation will enable you to make light of this characteristic.

Your revision schedule

The sign of the more adult-minded student is the ability to see not just weeks but months ahead. To pace yourself in preparation for exams you should start to think about them weeks before. Find out the date of your first and write the date of your first exam in your diary. Then, seven days before, write in the date for completion of all your consolidation work and exam preparation. You may not manage to keep to it exactly but a slightly ambitious date is better than an under-ambitious date. The aim is complete preparation before you sit your first paper. Earlier, measured preparation will release you from last-minute panic and, thereby, increase your confidence. It may, also, give you later some sense of smugness (students are human and open to such feelings) as you observe the manic and inadequate scrawlings of the less prepared to botch together revision.

Revision topic selection

Having identified your date for the completion of exam preparation you need to identify the topics that you wish to prepare. You may, already, know these from your teachers but even so it is helpful to find whether there are past exam papers. They will probably be in the department library or resource centre. It is a good use of resources to pay for photocopies if they can be purchased. Take care to note if the regulations and paper structure will change for your year.

With the information from these past papers and with the help of your teachers, decide on the topics you will prepare for the exams. Don't forget that you will need as many topics to which you are required to write answers plus a few more to give you a choice of questions. If you find you have poor information on one or two topics you have sufficient time between the spring and the exam to upgrade your notes.

When you have chosen your topics you are in a position to allocate time for their revision. Revision can begin while you continue your course: you do not need to have completed the whole course before you begin. There will be some members of your group, if they hear you have begun revision, who will tell you that you have begun too early but the adult-minded student will ride these comments and



nearer the exams you, and not they, will have confidence.

Your exam preparation programme

To an extent your work with preparation will depend on the work you have already undertaken. If you completed any of the suggested activities in the 'Working on information' in Chapter 3 those notes will be helpful too. The central skills that the exam will assess include:

1. Skills to understand a question and prepare an answer.
2. Skills to express your answer.
3. Your knowledge and understanding of the information and ideas of your topics.
4. Your ability to remember this knowledge.

You will have developed skills 1 and 2 throughout your course (see Chapters 7 and 8). Exam preparation involves transferring No. 3 to No. 4, that is, to your long-term memory.

Revision and learning procedure

For an exam, short-term memory should be transformed into long-term memory and the following is a good way to transfer information to your long-term memory. Assemble all your notes and essays on a topic and from this information create summary sheets - that is pages of information and ideas that condense your earlier notes. There are three great benefits of summary sheets. First, they are a short form of your full notes and, because they are short, they can be scanned quickly in order to refresh your memory. Second, if you follow a similar structure to your earlier notes, when you need to see the longer, more fully explained, notes you will be able to locate details speedily. Third, and most important, the creation of summary sheets lead you to be *mentally active* - to pass the information about the topic through your mind. This activity, itself, will help refresh your memory. Needless to say, the summary sheets should be thoughtfully and attractively laid out - a feature mentioned in Chapter 1 on note making. Once created, much information can be retained by reading your summary sheets several times. Advanced History requires a substantial foundation of detailed information from which you create your answers and if there are many details which you fail to retain in your memory, consider these procedures drawn from specialists in the psychology of learning.

Increasing the quantity of memorised information

If you consider you are light on factual information you could create a chronology of events, with the help of chronologies published in texts,

to add more factual substance to your notes and ideas. If your aim is to learn, for example, a list of 30 dates select just five key dates - one from near the beginning and one from near the end and three others. Learn these by constant repetition. Test your learning by writing out the five dates. Once learned, these five dates will be the 'pegs' to which the other 25 dates will be attached. For each of the five learned dates, remember the dates immediately before and after. Much learning in History uses a process called association. The unremembered (unknown) is remembered by its association with the known. Thereby your first five will become 15 and once you have learned 15, the next 15 can be learned as the gaps between the learned dates. History students are helped because dates may fit into a pattern. This same procedure can be used with the summary sheets you created.

Another method that some students find helpful is to make a recording of notes and to listen to them during other activities, such as journeys.

Short- and long-term memory

To convert learned information from short-term memory a phased learning programme will be most effective. The first occasion of learning will be the most demanding and will take longest. When complete, repeat the learning three days later and repeat a third time about eight days later again. Each subsequent session will take less time but remember, reading information without testing, by writing or talking, will reduce the benefit of the time you spend.

Consolidation and learning work is one the more demanding study tasks. It is best not to undertake this in sessions which are too long, until you develop your intellectual stamina and about 40 minutes is more than enough in the earlier weeks. And, because this is less easy work, it is best to undertake it earlier in the day.

Use of a learned topic

Once a topic is consolidated use it by applying your knowledge to questions. These you may have gained from past papers (see page 60). All that is required is notes for a skeleton type answer in which you consider the exact question and produce an argument in note form, an argument which will include an overall judgement and the main parts of supporting points with key evidence, arranged in paragraphs (see Chapter 7, Writing answers). These skeleton answers, together with your course work answers, provide prefabricated judgements which you can apply to the questions on the paper in the exam room, always taking care to answer the exact question, of course. If you follow these



procedures there will be few surprises on the question paper and much of your thinking will have been done during the course and your consolidation and learning. You will be free, thereby, to concentrate on finely crafted and effectively articulated answers.

The last twenty-four hours

Students who phase and pace their revision over the weeks before an exam have an advantage. While others panic and are over anxious, well-prepared students are composed and calm during the days before exams begin. How should the last day be spent? With revision finished there are no substantial tasks left but with the nearness of exams inactivity feels out of place. A good way to use the last day is to unstrenuously look over revision notes and, especially, skeleton answers (with their judgements and supporting evidence), thereby to remain active while avoiding the harder work of learning. The night before an exam a glass of beer, or alternative, is in order but do ensure you have a clear head for the exam day!

In the exam room

Well-prepared students are not in a panic in the exam room. This is especially beneficial when the awful time arrives to open the question paper. This is the time a few students in every exam make far-reaching errors: it is the time to take the very greatest care.

First, check the instructions just in case the regulations have changed. How many questions must be answered? Is it obligatory to answer questions from particular sections? Once you have confirmed the regulations, read all the questions which relate to the topics you revised and mark every question for which you could write an answer. Then, with the required number of questions in mind, say four, mark and number five questions in order of the highest mark you think you can gain. This is high-speed, intense work because to assess which questions you can answer, you need to run through how you would answer each of them and what information content you would include. In other words, you answer the question rapidly in your mind.

If you are asked to answer four questions why mark your preferences one to five? My reply is that you may find, once you begin an answer, that the question you choose is more difficult than you expected. Your fifth choice is your reserve question and, because it is already chosen, you do not need to spend time and effort on reselecting a question. With the selection completed, begin your first answer. This should be the answer for which you expect the highest mark.



Why attempt that question first? Your first answer is the occasion when you introduce yourself to the examiner. A good impression may linger, in second and later answers, longer than is deserved. You will, also, feel more comfortable and confident with a good answer finished.

One of the great mistakes in exams is to fail to spend an equal length of time on each answer (where each answer carries the same marks): higher marks for an answer on which you spend an unequal time is never sufficient to compensate for loss of marks for a short answer.