



Education

Ten key steps to examination success.

Guidance

Please read this guidance time and time again. And please follow it. We want you to do well, but YOU have to put the guidance into practice.

Ten key steps to examination success

1. **Prepare for the examination.** There is little time for formal revision at the end of teaching in, so you must revise as you go along!
2. **Look at past papers.** This prepares you for the types of question you will be asked, and the time you will have to answer each question. If there has been any major change in the format of the examination, then you will have been told about this in the course literature.
3. **Never try to 'spot' questions and never revise selectively.** This is a recipe for disaster. Even if your predicted topics do come up in the exam, there is no guarantee that you will be able to answer the specific questions that were set on these topics. Instead, you should go into the exam with enough knowledge to answer questions on any of the major topics in a course.
4. **During the examination, organise your time effectively. N.B. This is the single most common cause of under-achievement in exams.**

For example, if you have a 3-hour exam in which you must answer 4 essay-style questions, then that means 45 minutes per question. **BUT** you should **allow yourself 5 minutes at the start** (to read the questions and decide on the ones you will attempt) **AND 15 minutes at the end** - see below. That leaves you 40 minutes per question.

Now start on the first question, but **stop immediately when the 40 minutes has passed**. Don't worry if you have not finished the question - you have left 15 minutes at the end, so you can come back to this question and any others that you need to finish off.

Tackle your second question, and again stop after 40 minutes, and similarly for the third and fourth questions.

If you always adhere rigidly to this approach you will maximise your chances of success. You will never run out of time for all the questions because you have kept some time in reserve. Equally important, you will have scored the highest overall mark that you possibly can get, because exam marks follow the rule of "diminishing returns" - you get most of the marks for a question early on (in the first 20-30 minutes), and after that you have to work harder and harder for the remaining marks. In fact, the last 10% of marks for a question is almost impossible to get - very few examiners will give a mark above 80 or 90%. [The reason is simple: however good your answer might be, it could always

be better, so a marker is reluctant to give full marks. Perhaps it shouldn't be that way. But that's life.]

5. **Always answer the full number of questions.**

You would be surprised at the number of students who miss out questions and therefore fail an exam or obtain a lower grade than they deserve. The reason is obvious - they cannot answer all the questions (usually because they didn't revise) and so they decide to spend all their time on the questions they can answer.

This is foolish. For example, if you can answer only 3 of the required 4 questions then you cannot possibly get more than 75% of the marks for the whole exam. But it is even worse than that - even if you get three *first-class* marks (70%) for your three questions, this is still only 210 marks out of the possible 400. That's 53%, which is only just above the D/C borderline (or the third/ lower second class borderline).

Even if you think you know nothing about a topic, you can always get a few marks by making some sensible comments, and that can make the difference of a grade.

The same advice applies to questions that require you to answer several parts - each part of a question has marks allocated to it, and if you miss out a part then you cannot get the marks for it.

6. **Read the question carefully, underline all the relevant words, and stick rigidly to the question as set.** Again this might seem obvious, but again many students fail to follow this advice. Remember that examiners think very carefully about the wording of every question, and expect your answer to be directly on that topic. No examiner asks you to "*Write everything you know about a subject*"!

For example, if you are asked to write about the **wall structure of bacteria** then you will get no marks at all for mentioning the other features of bacteria - the membrane, the genome, etc. **You get marks only for the wall.** The moment that you start to write about other things, the examiner will write "*irrelevant*" in the margin of your answer book, and will only start giving marks again when you get back onto the subject. In short, you are wasting your own valuable time, and getting no marks for it.

7. For every question, **stop writing after the first few minutes and re-read the question, then stop again to recheck before your time is up.** Be absolutely honest with yourself, and ask 'Have I drifted off the subject?' This is surprisingly easy to do, and if you don't stop to check periodically then you drift into "*irrelevant*".
8. **Make rough notes at the start of a question, so as to organise your thoughts.** Then start your proper answer.

You almost certainly will be told to cross out the rough notes. But my advice is NEVER CROSS THEM OUT. **Remember that anything you cross out cannot be marked,** but if you leave your rough notes then the examiner should look through them (if only briefly). Perhaps you made a point in your notes that you forgot to put into your proper answer. That can count in your favour.

9. **Never answer more questions than required.** You can only get marks for the required number of questions. Every marker sticks rigidly to this rule, because we have to be fair to all the candidates - including those who did exactly what was required.
10. **Put yourself in an examiner's shoes and ask 'What impresses an examiner?'**

Imagine that **you** are spending **your** evenings and weekends ploughing through loads of exam answers - because that's what examiners do!

- o The examiner will get frustrated if he cannot read your writing. A badly written answer takes a long time to read, and by the time the examiner has ploughed through it he will have forgotten half of what you said. That's bad news for you! And don't try to obscure your lack of knowledge (e.g. a scientific name or a technical term) by illegible writing. We have seen this hundreds of times. If it cannot be read, it cannot get marks.
- o Underline key words or phrases. After reading through the whole answer, an examiner looks back at the number of ticks he/she has made, or the number of key words or phrases that you have identified. If you highlight these then the impression is favourable - the main points covered, so you will get good marks.
- o Never repeat things, even in a concluding paragraph. You can only get the marks once, no matter how many times you repeat the same point.
- o Learn the Latin names of organisms and other technical terms. It might be a pain, but it impresses examiners and shows your **competence**. A chemist would not get marks for saying "some chemical (I forget the name) combines with some other chemical to produce a tetrazolium compound". So why should a biologist get marks for saying "some fungus (I think it begins with M) parasitises wheat plants by producing cellulase enzymes"? We read that sort of thing all the time. And it doesn't impress.