

WRITING THE EXAM

While success depends in large part on preparation, much also depends on performance during the exam. And just as the method of preparing varies with the type of questions anticipated — whether essay, multiple-choice or problem-solving — the method of writing the exam must be tailored to the examiner and the questions posed.

Some students, because of a disability, will find it impossible to write their exam in the room assigned. Check with your director of student services if this situation applies to you. She will be able to inform you of special services — readers for blind students, individual rooms for learning disabled students, accessible rooms for mobility-impaired students, availability of transcribers, recorders, computers. Do not be shy about making requests; as a citizen of Canada, you are entitled equal access to education, and that, for better or worse, includes final exams.

General guidelines

There are two ways to write an exam. One is to skim the paper in a minute and a half and then write non-stop for three hours. This way madness lies. The other way is a lot easier on the nerves and produces much better results. It involves taking a thoughtful, methodical approach to the exam, treating it as a task over which you have control. Here are the steps.

Read the whole exam

As is true of many other academic tasks, writing an exam should begin with surveying the territory so as to introduce the mind to the area to be covered. Begin by reading the instructions, carefully. Take special note of how many questions you are to answer in each section. Circle that information, even if it is already underlined, capitalized, and offset in quotation marks followed by exclamation points. Top students seem particularly prone to answering too many or too few questions.

Read all the questions and jot down a few key words or phrases beside each one. (This will get your pen in gear and perhaps deceive your Woody Allen side into feeling that you are underway.) As you go through the questions, put a check mark in the margin beside any questions that you are pretty confident of being able to answer. Put an X, or some more inscrutable mark, beside those that you would not like to meet in a dark alley, so that you will not waste time and depress yourself by rereading them.

This should take about five minutes.

Prepare a strategy

Now spend another five minutes coming up with a strategy. Look over the questions again and decide, at least tentatively, which ones you are going to answer. Figure out how much time you have for each question. If all questions are of equal weight, calculate the time you have per question by dividing the total time remaining by the number of questions you have to do. Otherwise, take a look at the marking scheme. The exam probably totals one hundred marks. In that case, with about ten minutes of your three

hours gone, you have just under two minutes per mark (170 minutes/100 marks 1.7 minutes per mark). So a twenty-five mark question gets about forty minutes, a three mark question, about five minutes. Of course, you might change your mind while writing and decide to cut one answer a bit short, go overtime on another. Having the time budgeted by marks will make you aware that you are robbing Peter to pay Paul, sometimes a sensible decision.

Double-check your strategy to make sure that you have planned for the correct number of questions, and that the time you have budgeted for each adds up to the time you've got.

Answer the questions

Always answer the easiest questions first. There are three reasons for this. First, nothing succeeds like success. The experience of answering a question well will give you confidence and keep your neurotic tendencies at bay, whereas starting with a tough question can only make you feel miserable and interfere with your thinking. Second, starting with the easier questions will buy you time to cook up ideas for the tougher ones. You might have had the experience of waking up with a better idea for an essay than you had when you went to sleep the night before. The same sort of thing happens with exams. While the top of your brain is busy answering the easier questions, the bottom will be faithfully working away to see what it can come up with for you on the tougher ones. The split-level brain is blamed for much that is difficult and dangerous in human behaviour, but it has its advantages. Finally, if your subconscious fails you, at least you will have spent your time wisely, answering the questions you know, rather than the ones you don't.

Double-check

Try to reserve about ten or fifteen minutes at the end of the exam to double-check your answers. Now is not the time to undertake a meticulous revision of your work: the marker's estimation of your performance will not be enhanced by following your struggle through a maniacal session of frenzied scratching-out, caretting-in, and rearranging by means of asterisks and arrows. Any marginal improvement in your prose style will be lost in the marker's difficulty reading it. Instead, look for the real howlers — gross factual mistakes, grammatical errors, obvious omissions, non-existent transitions between paragraphs. Check to make sure you have numbered your answers correctly. Include the section number if the exam is divided into sections. Then hand the paper in.