**REVISION AND EXAM TIPS**

**The Technique of Exam Writing**

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| **AIMS**:   * To give advice on how to revise. * To inform students of the structure of the exam/test. * To display to students how they can improve their performance/do well in exams, i.e. to illustrate the skill/technique of exam writing.   *Note: this lecture is designed for students answering essay-based questions in exams.* |

Exams are a source of great anxiety for most students. Anxiety can come from a number of sources: one of the sources may be uncertainty about the structure and practicalities of the exam. Another cause for nerves may be a lack of confidence within the student about their ability to perform under exam conditions. This lecture aims to inform students about the nature of the exam as well as improve their approach towards exams (specifically for this exam-type and in general). In so doing, the lecture aims to simultaneously increase the student’s impetus to revise (and to revise fruitfully) and decrease student anxiety around exams.

**LECTURE**

Outline three components of the lecture – revision, exam structure, and exam tips – along with the overall aims of the lecture (as stated above).

# SECTION ONE: Revision [10 minutes]:

Revision should be a combination of: lecture notes, reading and practice questions:

1. **Lecture notes**: it is important to remember the purpose of lectures when using them as a revision tool. Lectures are aimed to give a foundation or scaffolding to a topic. Lectures mark out some of the important components of the theory or case or field you are studying. As such, they are introductory. They certainly should not be used as the sole source of revision.
2. **Reading**: it is only through thorough reading around a topic introduced in lectures that you will be able to put the points raised in lectures into perspective: you will be able to pick out the important elements to be expanded upon from lectures. At the same time, it is only through reading that truly independent, critical thought will arise. Seeing as the purpose of exams is to display your knowledge, the development of critical thinking through reading is vital.
3. **Practice questions**: It is important to display your knowledge of a topic by displaying your ability to answer a specific question on that topic.

Make a **revision timetable**:

* A revision timetable is a useful way to start thinking about your revision. It can help you begin to look at the course as a whole. Importantly, it can also help you realise how much time to you need to revise. It will, hopefully, mean you can avoid cramming.
* Be realistic: don’t overestimate how much you can cover in one day.
* Remember to take breaks.

A cautionary tale on **spotting**:

* Spotting is a difficult thing. On the one hand, the volume of reading in any given course, and knowledge required to master a particular topic, means that revising the whole course is all too big a task. Secondly, students are likely to have developed their own areas of interest within the course, making them more partial and enthused to focus on some sections rather than others. On the other hand, the topics in a course (in this case, a course on conflict) are likely to be interrelated and so knowledge of one topic or area is complementary to another. Courses, in general, build logically and become more sophisticated (or rely on knowledge from previous sections).
* If students are to ‘spot’, they should do so conservatively. They should take into account the nature of the course and assess which knowledge is ‘essential’.
* They should not, under any circumstances, spot questions. Spotting topics is as far as they should go. Students must be cautious about how they do this. Any given exam question does not ask the student to convey all they know on a topic; but rather to display their knowledge through answering a question. If students spot a particular question, they may distort the actual exam question to suit what they have in mind. This is a trap they should avoid falling into.
* So: if it’s the only practical way to revise (in-depth fewer topics) do so with the whole course in mind. Spot topics, not questions. Be careful not to narrow your options too much.

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| ***Revision technique***: put yourself under exam conditions:   1. Take a previous exam question or question from the course outline. 2. Give yourself the allotted time in the exam to answer the question, i.e. put yourself under exam conditions. 3. If you can, do this with a partner/group. Read over and give feedback to others in the group. Assess one another’s work on the basis of:    1. Did they answer the question set?    2. Was there an argument?    3. Did the argument build logically?    4. Was the argument persuasive?    5. Is there a strong introduction and conclusion?    6. Is the writing clear and with academic vernacular? |

As well as doing the practice exam questions, it’s a good idea to do practice essay plans for potential exam questions. This will help you think about structure and argumentation before you enter the exam hall.

# SECTION TWO: Exam Structure [5 minutes]

Give the specifics: e.g. answer 2 questions in 2 hours from a choice of 5 questions; essay format etc. In addition, if you have, provide the date, time and venue.

Give example of questions from previous years (follow class exercise below if suits your class).

Remind students of the rules of exams – no mobile phones etc; the procedure of exams – e.g. they must bring their student cards/ID; how they sit; and give practical advise – bring layers of clothing and water (perhaps a snack too). It can also be useful to tell students that, if they have a good reason (e.g. illness; death in the family etc.; or if they fall ill in the exam itself), they are eligible to apply for a deferred exam, i.e. discourage students from writing the exam if they are not in a suitable condition.

# SECTION THREE: How to do well in exams [30 minutes]

Despite the anxiety that students often feel around exams, they do provide an opportunity for students to improve their overall grade. Exam writing is a particular skill; a skill that can be learnt and practiced both within and out with the exam hall.

**Which questions should you chose?**

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| Q: If out of the 5 questions, you’ve revised and feel comfortable with 3 or 4 questions, which should you pick?  A: (i) Questions for which you can form the strongest, most coherent and sophisticated argument.  (ii) Not necessarily the question which you feel most comfortable with or know the most about – the ones that will challenge you and force you to be analytical. |

[Whilst the answer this question may be obvious to the marker of exam scripts, it is remarkable how uncritically students examine exam questions. This question, and the task below, reinforces that students should look strategically at the exam questions; they should not just jump to answer the ones they feel most comfortable answering, or the ‘simplest’ questions.]

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| ***Class exercise***: past exam questions   1. Provide examination questions – be they from previous class tests or exams, or invented afresh for the exercise. 2. Break the class up equally by the number of questions into large groups. 3. Instruct the students to discuss the exam question in three ways:    1. What is the question really asking?    2. How would/should you structure your response?    3. Is it a good question to answer? The students should ask themselves: will answering this question mean I can put together a strong and convincing argument? I.e. will this question tend me towards description or towards analysis? 4. Reconvene after around 5-10mins to report back to the class. |

The simple formula outlined below should provide a guide of how students might think about writing exams:

1. **Read the question**
   1. What is the question really asking?
   2. Class exercise (above)
   3. Don’t just look at the topic, look at the question itself:
      1. Can you answer it?
      2. Will your answer be descriptive or analytical?
   4. Which questions should you chose?
2. **Plan your argument**
   1. Write a plan/outline – this will keep you focused on the question set.

Make sure that your plan (i) addresses the question; (ii) is structured logically; and (iii) is achievable in the time set: do not try to make too many points. As a guide, for most essay-based exam questions, there should be one central argument and then three (maybe four) illustrative arguments that support (and possible undermine or critique) the central argument. Do not be over-ambitious about the amount you can write in the allotted time.

* 1. Make sure your arguments answer the question, make sure they build logically. It will be useful to continuously refer back to both the question your plan as you write to ensure you are always on track. Avoid tangents/diversions.

1. **Demonstrate your knowledge**:
   1. Show the marker that you understand the salient points
   2. Show the marker that you can apply concepts/theory to a case – use examples well.

E.g. The IRA is an example of a terrorist organisation; they used to bomb government buildings – this doesn’t tell me much

Need to explain: why the IRA resorted to terrorism; why the attacked government buildings, i.e. show a *causal* relationship

* 1. Do not try to cram in everything you know about a topic. The material you include must only be there if it helps you answer the question set; and all material included must be made relevant to the question.
  2. Be specific: you will not get many marks for platitudes or general observations

1. **General comments**
   1. Write in paragraphs
   2. Write in clear handwriting
   3. You don’t need to reference, but you should show that you have read and understood important authors. Don’t name drop. Present arguments.

This formula makes for simple arguments and answers. However, don’t confuse this with it being unsophisticated. Remember, the marker is looking for three central components: (i) a response that answers the question set; (ii) a strong, central argument; and (iii) a display of knowledge through (i) and (ii). It is expected that exam answers will be written in academic register with good spelling, punctuation and grammar.

A note on **timing**: it is necessary to be disciplined under exam conditions. If you have to answer two questions in two hours, you should be strict – give each answer equal share. As a guide: give yourself 5-10 minutes at the beginning of the exam to read the questions and decide which questions you can answer best. After this, you should divide the rest of the time equally between the questions. Take 5-10 minutes to plan your answer; and then 30-40 minutes to write your answer. Allocate 5 minutes to read through your answer at the end.

# SECTION FOUR: CONCLUSION [5 minutes]

Whilst exams are undoubtedly daunting, there are ways to prepare:

* Thorough and strategic revision which focuses not only on revisiting the course material but also on past or possible exam – through simulating exam conditions.
* Taking time to choose the questions which will lead to a more analytical paper.
* Writing with a clear structure and strong argumentation, assisted by an essay plan.
* By being aware of the practicalities – number of questions you need to answer in the time allotted (and being disciplined with that time); knowing the venue/date/time; bringing supplies – pens/clothing/drinks and snacks.

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