

# Glittering prizes or the winning formula

A new year, a new semester and this time you have the ideal strategy for success — how to prepare for exams

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**N**o more last minute cramming, no more high dose caffeine, no more drinking to excess. Instead, a resolve to attend every lecture, rewrite and revise the day's notes and spend four evenings a week in the library reading round the subject.

Sounds great doesn't it? It may even sound familiar. And yet here you are with only one week to go, an incomplete set of notes, an overdue piece of coursework and your best chance is that they'll ask the same question that's been on the paper for the past three years.

## A new semester

**O**K — reality check — let's go back to the beginning of the semester. Exam success is about taking responsibility for your own learning. Easy to say; less easy to do. We all know what we should do, but sport, weekend (and weeknight) excesses, personal commitments and the part-time job, all get in the way. Success comes from pacing your way through the semester, and a little forethought and planning now pays off in the long run. No

one is advocating 24/7 revision — that only leads to burnout and being “Billy-no-mates”.

We all dream about knowing what's on the paper before we see it. We listen out for broad hints from the lecturers — but, remember, they're not always reliable. Some staff seem to enjoy misleading you. So how do we get geared up content wise?

The worst nightmare is opening up the exam paper and realising that the first three questions are on subjects that are completely alien because you stayed in bed and never got the notes. Or maybe you disliked the subject — or lecturer — so much that you elected to ignore the topic when revising (rheology was a personal favourite of one of the authors though the university shall remain nameless).

## Ordered notes

**Y**ou have a few ways of avoiding this. A conscientious friend who never misses anything is fantastic, failing that, a reliable mate willing to take turns with

you at attending the dullest events and sharing notes is fine,— but make sure you have a legible copy as soon as possible. Trying to fill in the gaps the day before the exam will only end in tears. The best decision is to be everyone's conscientious friend!

Another mistake that many of you will make is not reading what you've written until the official revision period. While four nights a week in the library all term may seem excessive, half an hour's proof reading of the day's notes, ensuring they are unambiguous and checking you understand them, is worth a week's work at exam time.

What about the guy who parties all term, strolls in to the exam, and comes out with a first class mark? Why can't you be that lucky? Luck can play a part — whether it is natural academic ability or the right question on the day, but you can do things to improve your chances.

### Exam technique

**Y**ou may have to be a grafter, and knowing that early on gives you the chance to knuckle down. Even if you have a natural flair or a photographic memory, regurgitating notes word for word won't make you a high flyer. Markers look for evidence of good comprehension, thorough application and wider reading of the subject. Topical examples always impress. Splashing the cash on the recommended texts is not about owning the books but reading them.

The big question is — do you learn it all? What can you skip? There isn't a right answer. No lecturer in their right mind would advise selective revision (although most would admit to doing it themselves) because it can involve huge risks.

Looking at past papers and spotting trends is a game we all play, but new modules and worse, new lecturers, (who are unknown quantities) regularly result in the need to devote your summer holidays getting ready for a re-sit!

### What to revise

**T**he sensible approach means an early, but not necessarily heavy commitment to the whole syllabus. Grapple with your weakest areas. Be comfortable but not complacent with the things that come easily to you. But keep it in perspective — there is never going to be a 25-mark essay question on something that was glossed over in two minutes of a 10-lecture course. The subject that took two lectures and forty slides to explain is a far more likely focus.

### What type of exam?

**P**reparing for the format is almost as important as preparing for the content. With so many types of assessment, each requiring a slightly different approach, it is vital to understand the mechanics.

Timing is key, regardless of whether we have to dispense six prescriptions, answer 60 MCQs or write three essays. You will need details of the assessment structure. Make sure you've seen the course documents, module handbooks and online proformas. Past or sample papers give further clues on what to expect. Consider the number and style of questions and the exam duration, roughly calculate the time to allocate to each section and build in thinking time.

Practical exams are essentially open book exercises and invariably cover familiar procedures, although often with unfamiliar products. Surviving these is about being comfortable with the reference sources and knowing what's available in the lab and where to find it. Sad but true, attending the labs all term will pay off.

MCQs require you to be a bit smart. Superficially, 90 questions in an hour and a half means a minute per question — provided they are all the same style. In the current prereg exam, for example, you'd come unstuck with this approach. Four styles of MCQ are included in the paper — the more complex tend to be at the

end of the paper, so if you haven't done the first sixty questions by the halfway stage you'll struggle to finish. Getting to know the styles before the day means you can tweak the timing.

Written papers tend to be mixtures of short answers and essays. Planning your timing on mark allocation works in this case. Short answers need hard facts and bullet points generally straight from taught material. You should know the answer and be able to write almost immediately. Don't waffle, be succinct. With essay questions about 90 per cent of the marks you'll achieve are obtained in the first 50 per cent of the time you spend. This means that while you have more leeway to talk round a subject don't write too much, over run and leave yourself short for the last question. Allow about 25 per cent of essay time for brainstorming and planning and 10 per cent for reflection.

### Coursework

**M**any degrees now include a coursework element as part of the final mark. It's imperative to keep up to date with deadlines. Late submissions not only incur penalties but also eat into other activities, particularly at revision time, as well as making you unpopular with your tutors. Most academics are reasonable people and will react positively to a genuine problem. It's important to keep them informed, and if you are in trouble (including illness at exam time), make sure your personal tutor knows you and your problem. They can then speak for you at the exam boards.

### The day itself

**O**K, so the semester is almost over and the assessment period has started. You've checked the dates, times and venues yourself (don't rely on your mates, but going to the exam hall with them on the day usually makes sure you arrive!) We've all got our rituals, from wearing our lucky Scunthorpe United top to buying a packet of Polos on the way —

## exams

is useful here —it's the same for every exam:

- ▶ Dump your belongings in the designated area
- ▶ Take all permitted materials with you (reference sources, calculators, ID cards, etc)
- ▶ Does the desk wobble? Get it sorted — the exam is hard enough without being seasick as well!
- ▶ Are the clock and your watch synchronised?
- ▶ Fill in the attendance slips and listen to the invigilator's instructions.

Before you know it the exam is under way and the next thing you hear is "There's five minutes left". How do you feel now?

Cool? Calm? Collected? It all paid off.

Or . . . Next semester we'll get it right 

do whatever it takes to make you feel comfortable. But remember exam regulations might stop you holding on to a large cuddly toy!

Exam venues can be the most awkward places to find, often in buildings you didn't know existed and off the usual bus routes. Give yourself plenty of time to get there to avoid tearing in at the last minute all flustered. The other end of the spectrum is arriving so early that you're there before everyone else and then getting

in a panic that you've got the wrong place or day.

Don't worry if you don't recognise the invigilators, some universities use external teams — it's more important to recognise the rest of your classmates. At least then it's a pretty good bet you've reached the right exam.

By now the nerves are probably taking over as you file in and find a desk or workstation. Automatic pilot

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