

Exam Success Tips

Preparing for Exams

When you are getting ready for your exam, you should carry out your review continually and systematically well in advance — do not wait to review until the night before! Decide how much review you think you will need and schedule your review sessions such that you have sufficient time between them to digest the materials and refresh yourself. Some students like to review complex subject matter one step at a time, trying to completely understand each successive point and topic first and leave understanding the "big picture" until later. Others prefer to start with the "big picture" and work downwards to the details. This again reflects individual differences in learning and either method can be effective as long as it is applied systematically.

An important final point on preparing for your exam: on exam day, you will have the most probability of success if you are well-rested, calm, and poised. For most students, this means it is not a good idea to study late the night before the exam or try to "cram" information on the day of the exam itself. If you have prepared methodically and comprehensively well in advance, the best thing you can do on the night before the exam is to put your books down early, do something you find enjoyable, and get a good night's sleep. In the morning, have a nutritious breakfast and relax — when you sit down to write your exam, you will be rested and alert.

Writing Exams

The first thing to do when you open your exam envelope is to quickly skim through the whole exam once before answering any questions. You may want to underline or highlight key words as you read. Exams are time constrained, so you need to budget your time well. Start with questions you find easier and work your way through the exam towards the questions which will either take you a long time or which are not worth a lot of marks. You can budget your time by figuring out how much time you should be spending on each question (i.e., if your exam has 100 marks and is 3 hours, this roughly means 1.5 to 2 minutes per mark, so a 10 mark question should take you no more than 20 minutes; each multiple choice question is worth one mark). In managing your time, you need to be disciplined — if you are taking too long on a question, you are better to move on and come back to it later if you have time.

At the end of the exam, if you still have time remaining, review your answers. Do not leave early unless you have completely read through your exam at least once. If you are running out of time and cannot complete your entire exam, do not panic! Use the time you have remaining to its full advantage — write down in point form the basic points for each remaining question so that the marker can see that you ran out of time and can award you partial marks where appropriate.

If you are completing a multiple choice exam, you are advised to fill in the answer sheet as you answer questions, rather than trying to complete the whole sheet after finishing all of the exam. You will not be given any extra time to fill in the answer sheet at the end of the exam and you do not want to run out of time — it takes surprisingly long to fill these sheets in, and answers not recorded on the answer sheet will not be considered. If you are running out of time, you must concentrate on using the time you have left efficiently. For any remaining questions, quickly eliminate any obviously incorrect options and then make an educated guess from the remainder. No marks are deducted for wrong answers, so you are better off to leave no blank questions.

Exam Anxiety

Exam anxiety is a fairly common phenomenon that involves feelings of tension or uneasiness that occur before, during, or after an exam. Many people experience feelings of anxiety around exams and find it helpful in some ways, as it can be motivating and create the pressure that is needed to stay focused on studying. However, in some cases, anxiety can become so intense that it leads to disruptive symptoms that ultimately lead to a negative impact on one's performance. In these cases, it is important for students to attend to their symptoms and find a way to cope effectively, so that their schooling does not suffer any further.

What are the Symptoms?

Although anxiety can affect each person in different ways, there are several symptoms that are quite common. Some of these are emotional, which include feelings of fear, disappointment, anger, depression, or helplessness. Other symptoms are more behavioural, ranging from fidgeting or pacing to substance abuse or other self-destructive behaviours. There are also physiological symptoms, which include fast heartbeat, feelings of nausea, headaches, lightheadedness, sweating, and other disruptions in bodily functions. Finally, many people experience cognitive symptoms, such as negative thinking about oneself and racing thoughts.

Other symptoms include:

- memory blocks or “blanking out” on things that you have studied;
- fear of failing before the exam is even written;
- lower reading comprehension; and
- poor attention and inability to concentrate.

Some of the strategies for coping with exam anxiety are quite practical and relatively easy to implement, such as contacting a tutor to discuss course material, avoiding people who speak negatively, arriving early to the exam and reading exam directions carefully. Students should also ensure that they are practicing good time management skills and managing their stress on a daily basis through exercise, good nutrition and enjoyable activities. If you work on what you *have control over* you can help to minimize exam anxiety. Following are some specific tips for surviving the exam experience.

Exam Anxiety Tip 1: *Be prepared early*

The most common cause of exam anxiety is lack of preparation for the exam. Set up a study schedule at least three weeks before your exam. You may find that you actually need to start studying very early due to other commitments. Planning ahead also assists you to avoid cramming which can be a major cause of exam anxiety.

Exam Anxiety Tip 2: *Sleep well*

Regular sleep is one of the best ways to control stress. Getting up and going to bed each day at the same times ensures that your body and brain are getting the rest they need for optimal functioning. Students who follow a regular sleeping pattern have been shown to perform 30% better than students who stay up late or get up early to study.

Exam Anxiety Tip 3: *Same caffeine & sugar intake*

Keep caffeine and sugar intake the same during exam time. Don't increase or decrease the amount of coffee, tea or cola that you normally drink as your body and brain are accustomed to getting a certain amount. Keep things in your life as stable as possible, especially during exam time.

Exam Anxiety Tip 4: *Learned relaxed breathing*

When you display any symptoms of anxiety during studying or during the exam, use relaxed breathing to calm yourself. Take your attention away from the task and take a few slow breaths. Say to yourself, “calm and relaxed” as you exhale. Practice relaxed breathing before the exam.

Exam Anxiety Tip 5: *Don’t study the night before*

Studying the night before an exam causes your anxiety level to increase. Unfortunately, it doesn’t decrease when you go to sleep. Reduce anxiety by taking the evening off to relax — watch TV, see a movie, read a novel, etc.

Exam Anxiety Tip 6: *Review main themes*

If it causes you anxiety NOT to study the night before an exam, review the main themes of the course earlier in the day. Of course, that implies that you should have already studied well.

Exam Anxiety Tip 7: *Have a plan before the exam*

As part of your studying, think about how you will approach the exam, and what you will do when you run into trouble. Having a plan in place will assist you to worry less about failing, and help you to concentrate more on passing.

Exam Anxiety Tip 8: *Aim to do your best*

Often, students start thinking negatively when things aren’t going well on an exam. This can lead to lower self-confidence and increased self-doubt. Recognize and turn off your negative internal dialogue. Focus on the task instead of on yourself. Do not try perfection — aim to do your very best.

References

The Real Estate Division gratefully acknowledges the input of the University of Alberta for providing tips to reduce anxiety.

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