Online Exams

Are you writing online exams for the first time? Are you unsure about how to prepare for and write these exams from home? Due to the fact that online exams are written from home, it is incredibly likely that your exam is open-book. In open-book exams, students are allowed to use notes, texts, and/or other resources. These exams test your ability to **find** and **apply** information. In this handout, we will discuss commonly asked questions about writing online exams and provide ideas for how to prepare to succeed.

What should I expect from an online exam?

- **Not a test of memory:** Open-book exams don't test your memory; they test your ability to find and use information for problem solving, and to deliver well-structured and well-presented arguments and solutions. The instructor knows that you have your notes and text right in front of you, so is unlikely to ask questions that just call on you to copy information.
- **Test your ability to apply course material**: Open-book exams tend to ask students to apply, analyze, synthesize, compare/contrast or evaluate information. They test whether you understand the "big picture" of the course and how course concepts work together.
- **Well-structured answers are necessary:** The instructor will be looking for well-structured and presented arguments or solutions.
- **Expect increased challenge level:** The exam is likely to be more challenging than others, and the instructor is likely to have higher expectations for the quality of your answers and the extent of your critical and analytical thinking, knowing that you have course materials available to draw upon.

How should I study for an online exam?

- **Understand the demands of open-book exams:** Probably the biggest misconception about online open-book exams is that there is no need to study. In fact, you should study just as you would for any other exam. Having books and notes to refer to might mean you don't have to memorize as much information, but you still need to be able to apply it effectively.
- **Active learning:** Consider using active learning strategies such as creating a mind map that summarizes the course concepts or arranging an online chat with a friend to teach them the material you've learned.
- **Distribute practice**: Instead of cramming just before the exam, space out your study sessions for your courses. For example, if your test is 2 weeks from now, plan to study a little each day. When you forget some of the details, your brain has to work harder to reconstruct the information from your memory.
- **Switch up the topics:** Instead of studying one concept at a time, switch between multiple concepts/types of problems from your course. This will improve your critical thinking skills (compare and contrast the concepts and see the "big picture"). In problem solving courses, this approach improves your ability to identify the correct strategy needed to solve the problem which is essential in test performance.
- **Put yourself to the test:** Match the conditions when you study to the conditions of your test; this will improve your ability to recall the information during the actual test. For example, create your own test questions or use textbook questions to test yourself. Set a limited time to answer the questions to simulate the pressure you would feel during a test. Actively recalling the information you learned strengthens your memory.

How long should I study for an online exam?

- **Depends on your situation:** This depends...how comfortable are you with the course material so far? Are you caught up in the course? If you have missed lectures or do not understand certain topics then you should plan to spend some time catching up on any missed or difficult material.
- **Determine what course content is testable:** It is important that you make sure you understand what course content is testable then make a list of all of the topics that you need to study in order to be effectively prepared for the exam.
- **Decide on learning, review, and practice tasks:** Consider what types of activities you are going to be doing when learning and reviewing the different course topics. What does active and effective studying look like for you?
- **Plan when and how long to complete learning tasks:** Think about how much time it will realistically take you to complete these learning and studying activities. Assign approximate time estimates to get a sense of how long it might take you to work through all of your course content. It's always better to over-estimate how much time it will take along the way...things always take longer than we plan. Don't forget to build in time to complete any needed practice problems and questions or past exams if they have been provided by your instructor.

What else do I need to prepare/consider?

- **Find out exam requirements:** Information such as the time and date the exam should be submitted, how much time you have to complete the exam, the topic areas the exam will cover, how long your answers should be, whether you need to reference your answers, and the types of questions you can expect to see on the exam are crucial to clarify before writing your exam. You will also need to find out from your instructor exactly what you are allowed – and not allowed – to use on the exam, and make sure you follow the rules.
- **Organize your resources:** Organize your resources so that you can find the information you need efficiently, without wasting time during the exam. Please note that this does not mean that you rely on "finding" the answers during your exam, but instead that you can use course materials to back up or clarify your understanding. Write key concepts on sticky notes and use these as tabs to index your textbook, notes, and other materials so you can find them quickly.
- **Make summary notes:** Review the subject to get a good overview and determine the main themes and topics. From there, make brief and legible notes that summarize the important information using clear headings to organize your notes by topic. Consider making concept maps showing the relationships or connections between different concepts and parts of the course. Lastly, if formulas will be a part of the exam, note these in a separate, easily accessible place.
- **Get a good night's sleep:** On the night before the exam, don't stay up until all hours studying - you'll be fuzzy, stressed and unable to think clearly for your exam.
- **Choose a quiet place to write your exam:** Choose a quiet space to write your exam and minimize distractions/interruptions.

What should I keep in mind while writing my online exam?

- **Read questions carefully:** Before you start the exam, make sure you read all of the questions carefully and understand what you are being asked to do.
- **Use the exam time wisely:** For exams with time limits of 2-3 hours, time is likely to be scarce. Answer the 'easy' questions first; starting with the 'hard' questions slows you down and can leave you with insufficient time to address the others that you can answer more easily and successfully.
- **Don't use too many quotations:** Don't copy long chunks from the text or waste time quoting extensively. Use very few quotations – your own analysis is more important. Use the time and information to build a well-constructed answer.
- **Don't over-answer:** With lots of materials available, it can be tempting to over-write. Answer the question, and aim for concise, accurate, thoughtful answers that make good use of supporting evidence.
- **Review your answer:** If you have time for review at the end, check your materials more extensively to verify accuracy or to find additional points.

What do I do if I have a technology problem while writing my exam?

To be prepared for any tech failures, it is a good idea to:
- **Check beforehand:** Check your wifi connection before you begin your exam.
- **Copy and paste:** Copy and paste answers into a Word document just in case your internet glitches.
- **Screen shots:** Take screen shots of answers you've submitted for your records.
- **Contact instructor if you experience tech issues:** If you experience tech issues while writing your exam, contact your instructor right away. Include a screen shot of whatever you've completed as well as any error message you may have received.
- **Alert your professor beforehand if necessary:** If you have had a history of difficulties with your wifi at home, alert your professor to this prior to writing the exam. It could help your professor understand if there are any time outs in your exam.

Acknowledgements:

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