Tackling exams

Many of the courses at CQUniversity require you take an exam. Exam preparation helps you to revise and consolidate what you have learnt over the term or, in some cases, over the year. While exams can be stressful, thorough preparation will help you to stay calm and perform to the best of your ability and knowledge.

A good set of notes are important for exam revision. If they have been compiled properly they should be a comprehensive summary of what will be in the exam. Preparation should, to a large extent, involve revising and extending your notes.

Devise a revision strategy

A good way to begin your exam preparation is to clear your work space. This is a new phase of the term. New learning has finished and it is now time for consolidation, revision, and application. Prepare a revision plan, taking into account all the exams you have and the amount of time you will need to revise for each. Cover each week of term systematically. What were the key points, theories, and ideas covered? Write a summary for each week, or each topic/aspect of the course. Think critically about the course content. If you were the lecturer of this course, what questions would you ask to test if students understood? Form a study group to revise together, if this works for you. This can also serve as an environment to practise test questions. You might devise and ask each other questions about the course content. Ensure that you check whether there are previous exams available for the subject. Complete the past exam questions and compare your answers with those in your study group. You can also collaborate with others if you are a distance education student—for example, by emailing, phoning, video calling, sms’ing, or instant messaging study group members.

Prepare yourself to take the exam

You also need to prepare mentally for your exams. Make sure your revision plan includes breaks and rewards: for example, a swim, a run, a social event or a movie. It is important to remain motivated and to feel you are achieving your goals. When you feel tired, take a break. Also make sure that you sit in good light and a reasonable distance from your computer. Revise well but do not overdo it. Know your limits and when your brain feels full. Try to remain positive—if you attended classes, and have understood and revised the content, you should do well.

Make sure you get enough sleep: both during your preparation, and the night before your exam. Consider your diet too; you do not want to get sick. Eat healthy food, drink plenty of water, and limit your nicotine, alcohol, and caffeine intake. Make sure you exercise as much or more than you normally do. A jog can be good for your body and concentration.
Make effective use of time during the exam

Time will pass quickly, so be ready to use it effectively. Check the time before you begin and regularly throughout. Read the whole exam before beginning. Allocate appropriate time to the different sections. Do the sections that are worth more marks first. Write legibly. Ensure that you answer the question well: ask yourself what exactly am I being asked to write about? Leave some time towards the end to check everything before you hand in the answer book. Wherever possible answer every question that is required. If you become overwhelmed, try to stay calm and breathe slowly and deeply; take a short break and try to clear your head and get back on track.

Make sure you answer the question. At worst, and even if you are really unsure of what to write, make sure you write something - you might pick up some marks for it. You will get nothing for handing in a blank piece of paper.

Tackling different types of exams

Online and open book exams are different from traditional closed book exams, where no additional materials are allowed in the exam room. In an open book exam, you are likely to have access to your course materials. Your preparation should include bookmarking pages and re-familiarisation with your course chapters, weekly topics and learning materials.

Tips for exam preparation: ensure that you have revised all aspects/topics, have viewed previous exam papers and have tried out typical questions; check when your exam is on, how long it runs for and where it is held; be on time, or preferably a little early; read the whole exam paper very carefully during the perusal time'; answer the questions asked (and only the questions asked); aim to stay calm—breathe deeply; when it is all over, reward yourself with a treat and some time away from study.

Sources for further study (shown in CQUniversity Harvard referencing style)

Burns, T & Sinfield, S 2012 Essential study skills: the complete guide to success at University, 3rd edn, Sage, London.


