Preparing for Open-Book Exams

Open-book exams require you to:

- learn for understanding rather than just remembering
- understand how to find information
- make good notes and organise materials for fast reference
- apply the information in your sources to the questions.

Study

You need to study for open-book exams just as you would for any exam. If you know your subject, you'll have a knowledge base to draw on. You will also understand how and why topics are linked. This style of learning equips you well for exams and 'real life' experiences.

Familiarise yourself with texts and notes, and make sure you can locate important information. Be familiar with your materials so don't waste valuable exam time searching through them.

Plan ahead

Work out the materials and resources you will take into the exam room.

Only take what you need into an open-book exam. Carefully select your materials and resources and organise them for quick reference. This includes having spare pens, pencils and erasers. If you need any other tools, make sure they all work and pack them neatly. For those using non-solar calculators, don't forget spare batteries!

If you are doing a take-home exam, gather readings, notes and resources together beforehand and organise them neatly in your study area at home. Set up a quiet space where you can concentrate and work without interruptions.

Find out the exam requirements

For open-book exams, find out:

- the materials you can take into the exam room
- how much time you have
- the topic areas the exam will cover
- how long answers should be
- whether you need to reference
- the types of questions, essays, short answers, etc.

For take-home exams, find out:

- the time and date the exam should be handed in
- where the exam should be handed in
- how much time you have to complete the exam
- the topic areas the exam will cover
- how long answers should be
- whether you need to reference
- the types of questions, essays, short answers, etc.
Don't anticipate questions

When you prepare your notes, don't waste time guessing possible questions or preparing 'model' answers; pre-prepared answers don't work. Essay style questions tend toward a 'free' response rather than a fixed 'single right answer' question so formula answers don't fit. However, you do need to have thought through conceptual frameworks and philosophical positions and have some general conclusions in mind. You don't need to know everything, but you need to know how to find the relevant information.

Practice

Your lecturer or tutor may provide some sample questions or a dry run. You might also want to check out some past exam papers in the Library.

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.

Preparing notes and materials

Organise

A large amount of materials might make you feel secure, but you'll probably work best relying on no more than a few pages of notes and a few well-chosen texts.

Unless you're sitting a take-home exam, you'll need to work within a short time limit e.g. a few hours. To do this well, try to have the essential facts, formulae, etc. at your finger tips. Also, writing a flow chart to show how the relevant topics are connected is very helpful.

Preparing resources

Before the exam

- Use tables of contents and index pages to locate relevant sections in the books you plan to use.
- Bookmark useful chapters or pages. Post-it notes can be helpful here.
- Prepare brief summaries, e.g. in margins of texts to provide a quick reference.
- Prepare a list of key information (formulae, key definitions etc.) likely to be used.
- Use index cards to list key topics and relevant page numbers of texts. Use one card per book. This can help you find information quickly.

Preparing notes

Make some useful notes for yourself

- Review the subject to get a good overview.
- Work out the main themes and topics.
- Identify key concepts or information.
- Make brief and legible notes.
- Summarise important information.
- Use clear headings.
- Organise notes by topic.
- Identify how topics are connected.