Exam Preparation
Podcast

Hi, my name is Lara and I am talking to Karen Dellar. Karen is a Study and Learning Centre Advisor at RMIT University. She has taught internationally, in secondary and tertiary institutions and, from time to time, is a student herself.

Hello Karen.

PODCAST 1: STRATEGIES for PREPARING
When should you start to prepare for exams?

Ideally about four weeks before the exam, start to map out the topics to study. Base the study around the course outline or course objectives. Don’t try to learn everything you can from the first topic because you may then run out of time to do the other six! What you should do is identify the key points that you need to know…throughout the course and each time you revise. You can add a bit more detail around those points.

At this point in your preparation, you should make sure all of your notes are complete. Of course you will still be having lectures, so it is really easy to put this off until you have a big mess at the end. Any questions still hanging over your head from the first half of the Semester, seek answers to them now or start making appointments to see your tutor.

What information is important to have before an exam?

Get to know the exam structure and the timing, and where it is, of course. If the exam room is somewhere that is not familiar, go and find it a few days before. You do not want to be running around looking for the exam room five minutes before the exam. And also find out the length and the structure of the exam you don’t want this to be a surprise either! If you can, get your lecturers to explain the structure of the exam beforehand. The things you need to know are these: the time you have, and the number of questions and sections you need to answer. This will let you work out how much time you will have for each section when you’re in the exam. Try to find out the type of questions that you have, whether they are multiple choice, short answer or long answer. And try to find out the weighting or value of each section. The time you should spend on a question should be in proportion to the percentage of marks it carries. In other words, you would spend one quarter of the exam time on a section that is worth 25%.

So you don’t always do every question?

Not always. Find out if you are required to select questions rather than do the whole exam. Get to know the compulsory questions as opposed to the elective questions. Many students waste valuable time and effort doing more questions than they were supposed to. And unfortunately, the examiner will not always choose the best answer. They will probably just choose the first! It is always better to find out from the lecturer herself what form the exam will take. Never assume that the structure will be the same as the year before. Things can always change from one year to the next.

What if you get sick?

In any case, plan ahead for any health concerns as far as you can. Remember, the end of year exams are in the middle of hay-fever season in Melbourne. If you suffer from allergies, be prepared with some medication. If you are seriously ill, or injured and you cannot attend an exam, you will need to complete an ‘Impact Assessment Statement’ contained in the Special Consideration Application and submit these at the Hub within two working days of your scheduled exam or assessment. If your application is approved, you may be granted a deferred exam or an alternative assessment. The alternative assessment will depend on your subject lecturer.

Can the Disability Liaison Unit (the D.L.U) help?

Special exam arrangements can be organised through the Disability Liaison Unit. If you injure your hand for example you may get extra time or someone to help you write or if things make it hard for you to do an exam in the prescribed way or time then get in contact with the D.L.U and they will be able to organize alternative exam arrangements for you. The earlier you can inform the University about your situation and start this process if that is possible, the better. Equitable assessment arrangements can take a little bit of organization.
And what if you have an ongoing condition rather than a sudden illness or injury?
You can manage your ongoing medical conditions, these may be physical or mental, or learning disorders and organize ‘equitable assessments’ for those too. Equitable assessment can be planned for ahead of time. You usually apply at least 4 weeks prior to your exam for this situation.

Should I use past exam papers?
If the course (and especially if the lecturer) have not changed in past years, past exam papers can be a good guide for what to expect. However, keep in mind that things do change, topics get left out, new topics get put in so past exams can only be used as a rough guide. Always have your present course outline at hand and compare it with that. With that in mind, if you look at exam papers over a number of years, you can often see a trend. You may be able to identify a type of question or a topic that consistently comes up year after year. And it is good to get familiar with the layout and types of questions that a particular lecturer prefers.

Should I study using the past exams?
Well, they are not your study guide. They don’t necessarily include everything you may need to know. Nonetheless, if you can find a past exam paper that reflects the material that has been in your course, I definitely recommend that you should practice with it. And by that I mean actually do it, don’t just look through it and think of the answers. Writing things out makes you think about things a lot more carefully and it is good practice to do it with the time limit too.

What should I do the night before the exam?
Most importantly, get a good night’s sleep. Pack your bag, pens, calculator, notes and books that you are allowed to use, your student ID. Make sure that you’re 100% sure about the exam room and the starting time. Aim to get there half an hour early, just in case of traffic hold ups.

PODCAST 2: STRATEGIES IN THE EXAM
What is Reading Time?
You usually do not start to write your exam straight away. Students must spend about 15 minutes just reading the exam without writing. What are you supposed to do during this time? First, check that you have the right exam. Mistakes like this can be made, unfortunately, especially if you have a subject with different streams or different levels. Check all sides of the paper to see what is printed. It is an awful feeling to think that you are finished and then at the last minute find a page that you did not know was there. Really, really important…READ the INSTRUCTIONS. It is an awful waste of time to do four sections when you only have to do three. You don’t want to skip a question that was compulsory either. So many students skip over the instructions because they think that they’re just not important. It can potentially make a huge difference to your result.

So Reading Time is really important?
Yes. But the main reason for it is so that students read the questions carefully. Whether it is a short answer… or long answer question…..or even a multiple choice…..the point where most students go wrong is in misreading the question.

What should you do?
Pay attention to the key words. Underline or highlight these. And watch out for absolutes, words like ‘never’, or ‘not’ or ‘always’ or ‘must’. Most importantly, you need to identify the direction words, that is, what the question is asking you to do.

What do you mean?
For example, if a question is asking you to ‘compare’, you have to point out the similarities and differences between two things. If it is asks you to ‘illustrate’, you need to give examples. If you have to ‘evaluate’ something, you have to give it a value. You have to say how good something is or how unsuccessful something was – and of course, explain the reasons for why you are saying that. You can lose a lot of marks if you don’t interpret the question properly.
Can you tell me more about how to do this?
Analysing essay questions is a big topic, so I won’t be able to deal with it completely here and now. However, there is lots of information on the World Wide Web about this. You could also log onto the RMIT Learning Lab and read about essay writing skills. OR you may like to come and discuss this with a Learning Advisor at the Study and Learning Centre.

What else should you do during Reading time?
Pick out the easy questions – and do them first. It gives you some marks quickly and it makes you feel confident. You should also pick out the compulsory questions. And pick out the high value questions. You could roughly calculate how much time to spend on each part if you haven’t already done that. As I’ve said, do this according to the marks that can be earned, for example, if a question is worth 30%, it should get three times the time you spend on a 10% question. Don’t calculate your time up to the last minute though, try to allow yourself some time for review or going back to questions at the end. You could also select your essay question, if you have any, during the reading time and perhaps, start to plan it.

How can you best use the exam time, when you start writing?
Don’t get bogged down. When the time you have assigned to a question is up move on! Come back later if possible. Two questions done reasonably well will give you more marks overall than if you do one perfectly and the other one badly. And if you get stuck or go blank leave it. Mark the question and come back later. A problem can look really different after you focus on some other questions and look at it later with different eyes. Finally, stay until the end. Even if you finish, don’t leave early. Use the time to check your answers while you are calm and relaxed. You may regret leaving early but you will never regret staying to the end.

PODCAST 3: DIFFERENT STRATEGIES for DIFFERENT QUESTIONS
How do you deal with Multiple Choice questions?
You should do this. Cover the choices and try to think of the answer before you look at them. Multiple choice answers can be written to confuse and distract you. So, think of what you know before you read them. Read all the choices. Don’t stop at the first one that sounds good. Two multiple choice answers may be correct, but there may be one that is better than the other. You should also read the stem of the question, that is, the first part or the first line before you get to the a, b, c choices. Read the stem along with the choice before you select it. This ensures that you’re answering exactly what you’re being asked.

For example: The stem may ask you: “Which country hosted the 2000 Winter Olympics?” You may choose:
a) Sydney…but that is not a country.
b) Australia, but Australia did not actually do the Winter Olympics.
Or you may be careless and choose:
(c) China… because we are hearing a lot about the Olympic Games in Beijing these days.

What should you do if you don’t know the answer to a Multiple Choice question?
At least, don’t leave any Multiple Choice questions blank. If you have absolutely no idea, GUESS! – that is, unless there are penalties for incorrect answers. WATCH OUT for that. Read the Instructions. It makes a multiple choice section very challenging. But if that is not the case, 25% chance of getting it right is better than zero. And as a general rule of thumb, don’t change your answers. Often your first instinct is the best. If you are really unsure though, mark a question and come back to it later. As I said, after you have done lots of other questions, the answer might come to you much more easily.
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What are the other types of questions.... and how do you deal with them?
There are Short Answer Questions. These may be a few lines, or a paragraph or two in length. These tend to require simple facts and recall or simple applications of laws or principles. The lecturer is looking at what and how much the student knows. It pays to write as much as you can, everything that you feel is relevant to the question. At the same time, it is also good to be succinct and to the point. Dot points may be an efficient way to answer this type of question.

So...are long answered questions handled differently?
Yes indeed. Long Answer or Essay Questions are usually several paragraphs long and have their own structure, as in a brief introduction, a body and a conclusion. This type of question is useful to see how the student can analyse a problem, interpret a given situation, develop a solution, or just present a clear and logical argument. Instead of writing lots of what you know, in point form, it is better to be very selective. And structure what you want to say very carefully. Don’t go off the track. Don’t talk about things that don’t answer what is being asked. Don’t mention things just to show that you know them. If it doesn’t address the question, it will be irrelevant and confusing and more likely reduce your marks than add to them.

It sounds like you should write out a plan?
Definitely, it is really important that you do a plan for essay type questions. Don’t just dive in and start writing. A long rambling chain of thought will not earn the marks you’re hoping for. You need paragraphing and a simple introduction and a conclusion. If you make it easier for the marker to read he or she will naturally give it higher marks. Now don’t be afraid of how long this takes. Doing a plan is an excellent investment for your time. Once the structure has been thought out, it is surprisingly easy to fill in the details. Sometimes it can be difficult to choose which essay topic you want to do in an exam.

Yes I agree. And it is hard to give advice here other than don’t waste too much time trying to decide! I can say that some essay questions can be very open-ended. That is, they give a lot of freedom to discuss or write about what you want. But that doesn’t make them easier. Unless you already have some clear and well considered ideas and maybe even some practice with a similar question, you can easily get off the track especially under exam pressure. However, if you have been able to prepare for one of the essay questions, it is always better to stick with that one rather than do another one that you feel is easier at the last minute. Having examples or references you can cite will earn extra marks. It would be a shame to give away that advantage.