Making the grade in exams

At exam time you may experience a higher level of anxiety. If it is not too excessive it may act in your favour. If you have experienced success in tackling examinations and tests then it is useful to recall your past successes and strategies which you used. If you have not developed successful strategies or wish to consider some alternatives then you may appreciate the following points which other students have found helpful.

The purpose of revision

The major aim of revision is to get a clear overview of the subject and to establish connections between various parts of the course. Determining what you understand and what areas require further attention is an important part of revision.

Effective use of revision time

- Making summaries of important sections and noting diagrams, charts and graphs.
- Make links between different aspects of the course and where possible represent these in a diagrammatic form.
- Recognise the times of the day or night at which you study most effectively and use those times for the most conceptually difficult tasks, and assign easier material to times in the day when you are less effective.
- If revision is begun early then there is time consult tutors and lecturers to clarify areas of difficulty.

Knowing what you are preparing for?

Revision should also be related to the type of assessment or examination which you will be undertaking. Hence knowing the format of the exam is an important early step. Questions which you might ask to establish this are:

How will the exam be structured?

- How long is the exam?
- How many sections are there, and are they compulsory?
- How many questions must be completed and what choice is possible?

What types of questions will be included in the exam?

- Multiple choice?
- Short objective answer?
- Problem solving?
- Essay?
- Practical?

What can you take into the examination?

For example, calculators, dictionaries, texts, notes, etc.
Using previous exam papers

Working through exam papers from previous years is a good way of establishing some of your strengths and weaknesses and establishing areas in which you require further revision. Do not rely entirely on previous examination papers for a guide to structure and content as these can change from year to year and a more accurate guide can be gained from staff who are setting the paper this year.

Revision for specific types of exams

Generally you should be aiming at an overall understanding of the content of your course. However more specific revision will be related to the type of exam which you will be facing in that particular subject.

Practical examinations

The most appropriate way of preparing is to practice the task which you will be required to undertake in the exam. If you will be required to identify the features of bones, rocks, etc., then practice with a fellow student selecting items and identifying relevant features. Generally practical exams are best prepared for by practicing the task with another student acting as ‘examiner’.

Problem solving questions

Examinations in mathematics, physics and a number of other areas commonly follow this format. The most appropriate way of preparing is to do lots of problems similar to those which you will confront in the exam. Understanding theories and formulae and being able to adapt these to a variety of problems will also be necessary.

Multiple="multiple" choice questions

Many subjects have a multiple choice section as part of the examination and unfortunately many students assume that because they are only required to recognise rather than recall information in this form of question, it is not necessary to do any specific revision.

A well written multiple choice examination will require you to have a clear understanding of the topic and to be able to integrate material, therefore a thorough knowledge of the area is important together with an ability to carefully read questions and discriminate between similar material.

Essay questions

Careful analysis of the question and planning of the overall approach are the keys to success. When examining the question, note the content area and then examine carefully in what way you are being asked to tackle the content area (eg. discuss, compare, contrast, illustrate with examples, etc.). An answer that presents information about the content without answering the question is unlikely to achieve the desired result.

For each question allow approximately five minutes of the allotted time for sketching out a rough plan, which can be in brief single word or diagram form. This will ensure that you include all relevant information and maintain direction.

Short answer questions

As with essay questions it is important to examine the question carefully and ensure that only relevant information is included. Short answer questions individually are worth only a small proportion of marks, and rely on you being able to write information in a concise and precise form. Where relevant, include diagrams and graphs, but make sure that these are clearly labelled to indicate you understand the information. In some cases a well-labelled diagram can replace several lines of written information. Drawing a diagram may also alert you to information that you have forgotten or may give you a visual representation which you are
then able to focus on for writing. If diagrams are required in your subject areas, then practice drawing them from memory as part of your revision.

**Planning your time in the examination**

Knowing the structure of exams, it is possible before entering the examination room to plan out your time, according to the number and value of questions (eg. 5 questions x 20 marks each = 25 minutes each, with the five minute planning for each essay, plus 30 minutes for checking and last minute additions). It is important to stick to the allotted time, as five questions attempted and partially completed are better than three questions fully completed and two not attempted.

**Dealing with memory blocks**

It is possible that you will begin to answer a question then part way through discover that you have forgotten some relevant material or simply feel unable to go on with the question.

Firstly try to write down any words or ideas that may be associated with the question, or visualise diagrams or other related materials to establish cues and connections.

If after a few minutes you are still unable to go on, leave a few pages and proceed with another question. It is likely that the relevant information will resurface once you begin concentrating on another topic.

**Coping with examination anxiety**

Being well prepared will ensure that you maintain anxiety at a lower level. However some increased level of physiological arousal is normally associated with tests and examinations and many people function well with a slightly increased level. However if the level of stress, as indicated by increased heart rate, excess perspiration, palpitations, churning of the stomach, etc., reaches a level which is uncomfortable for you and affects your performance in a negative way then it is useful for you to practice a relaxation techniques.

The simplest relaxation technique to practice is regular deep breathing. Simply take a deep breath, hold it and count slowly as you let it out. Repeat this four or five times and you will notice a reduction in your physical signs of stress. This can be done on the tram or train on the way to exams, outside the exam room or during the examination if you feel the need. It is most successful if it is regularly practiced over a period of time in preparation for the exams. It is best to practice relaxation techniques in a seated position. Training in relaxation techniques is also available through the Counselling Services.

**Some general comments and considerations**

Tackle the easiest questions first as this will enable you to build your confidence for tackling more difficult questions.

- Clearly label questions and begin each one on a new page.
- Clearly explain any assumptions which you may have made in answering a question especially if you believe a question to be ambiguous.
- Write or print as clearly as possible as this will ensure that the marker is not distracted from the information which you have presented.
- Do not spend a lot of time worrying over questions or parts of questions which you cannot do, move on to those which you are able to complete and return to the others later.
- Avoid exam post-mortems. They serve very little function and may distract you from the task of preparing for the next examination.
- Think positively, by recalling past successes which you have had in examinations and tests.

Assistance in these areas and many others can be obtained from the RMIT Student Counselling Service. The RMIT Counselling Service offers free and confidential counselling to all RMIT students. Counsellors may help you to explore your concerns, both personal and academic.

The Counselling Service can be contacted at **9925-4365** Monday through Friday, between 9am and 5pm.