Effective Examination Preparation

Introduction

Examinations may be an important part of your programme of study and it is important that you are properly prepared for them. There is not a single ‘best’ method of preparing for examinations as each of us will have personal preferences of where and how we prepare. However, it is possible to draw up an effective method for examination preparation which will meet your individual needs.

Productive Revision

Most students have some idea of how to go about preparing for examinations but what proved useful for school examinations may be less effective for examinations on programmes of higher education. You need to identify what will be the most efficient method of revision for examinations on the course you are now studying.

You will need to develop productive working habits to aid your revision. These could include:

- Reducing detailed notes into a shorter format;
- Writing answers to sample or past examination papers under timed conditions;
- Re-reading and summarising course notes;
- Planning time for revision sessions and adhering to your schedule;
- Preparing brief essay plans for specific questions.

You will need to find the most appropriate place to undertake your revision. Again this is about personal preferences but there are some key factors to take into account.

- The location should be quiet and free from interruption;
- Ensure that everything you require (paper, pens/pencils, notes, textbooks etc) is in place before you start;
- Avoid access to distractions;
- What is the best time of day for you?
- Should you revise at home or in a library?

Getting in the mood

You need to establish in what frame of mind you need to be in order to work best. For example, you should be relaxed and in an appropriate environment where you will not be interrupted.

Preparing for examinations is not just about learning and memorising facts and information for repetition in an examination. You will need to consider the following:

- What do the examiners expect;
• The nature of the assessment criteria;
• The learning outcomes for the unit/module
• Are your expectations realistic;
• Developing an efficient note taking system;
• Cracking the exam question code.

The last point is particularly important. Examiners tend to adhere to a particular style for their examinations and analysis of past papers may indicate the type of questions which are likely to be set. For example some examiners may ask you to analyse a particular situation while others may ask you to compare and contrast different scenarios. Time spent ‘cracking the code’ can work to your advantage.

Revision notes

Making good revision notes is an essential part of the examination preparation process. Effective revision notes will provide you with an indication of what you understand about a subject/topic and where gaps in your knowledge still remain.

The format in which you produce revision notes is largely a matter of personal preference. However, whatever system you adopt it provides you with useful notes and is an efficient use of your time and effort.

Good revision notes will help you to:

• Understand new concepts;
• Gain an overview of a topic or unit/module;
• Group information in an easily accessible format.

Examination techniques

Part of your revision time should be spent in developing and/or improving your examination technique. You should practise the skills required to successfully complete the examination. These skills will include:

• Analysing past examination papers;
• Planning essays and reports;
• Writing appropriately and accurately;
• Using appropriate concepts and theories in your answers;
• Synthesising information and drawing a conclusion;
• Identifying which type of question you are good at answering;
• Managing your time during an examination;
• Prioritising questions in the examination.
Some final thoughts

While revising is a vitally important part of the examination process it is important that you adopt a balanced approach. You should identify what time periods are suitable for revising. For example, some people like to work for 2 – 3 hours and then take a quite lengthy break while others prefer to work for shorter periods of around one hour with more, but shorter, breaks. You should identify which pattern best suits your needs.

Relaxation is a vital part of the revision process. You should set a revision plan which includes time for relaxation. This may include having one day each week free from revision or an evening set aside to meet with friends. Well planned relaxation will refresh you for the next round of revision sessions.

Do not revise the night before an examination. If you have revised in an organised manner there should be no need for this and you need to be fresh when you start an examination. Clear evidence exists to show that students who are tired when they start an examination underperform.

Do not be tempted to learn new information immediately before an examination. You will not retain this information fully and may use it incorrectly during the examination.

Finally, get a good night’s rest before the examination!

A well-planned approach to preparing for examinations is likely to improve your examination performance so start the process in good time and build your revision into your daily schedule well in advance of the examinations.