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The Best Approach to Exams



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Exams can be very stressful for students and often can seem very daunting and intimidating. However, with a bit of preparation, they can seem less of a mountain to climb!

One key strategy is to organise your revision effectively. The exam can theoretically cover the entire module, and it can be hard to decide what to focus on. One good way to approach this is to draw up a revision timetable, and more importantly, to stick to it!

First, gather your materials for the module. This will include:

- Your textbooks
- Study guides
- Answers to Activities and Progress Checks (which are in the study guides)
- Feedback for formative assessments (this gives you a good idea of what your strengths and weaknesses are)
- Formative assessment questions
- Emailed feedback from tutors.
- Any notes you have made.

The study guides are divided into sections, so a good place to start would be to timetable these so that you do (for example) 2-3 sections per week. For each section, draw together the relevant course materials.

Then **write some notes on each section.** These notes should include:

- The key issues raised.
- The main topics.
- The key authors and theories associated with each topic.

You will then have a list of notes, probably around 3-4 pages worth, which give you a basic summary of the course. After around 4 weeks you should have covered the whole module in this way and have summary notes for the entire module.

The next step is to 'boil down' these notes into a single sheet. Again, focus on the main topics and the key theories and authors. The aim here is to have 'triggers' so that when you see the question, you will remember the theories and authors associated with the wording of the question. In exam situations, it is very difficult to remember large sections of information. By having trigger notes, you are much more likely to remember what you need to remember. It is important though to **WRITE DOWN** your notes when revising; this makes the trigger effective and allows you to clearly remember what the topic is about. The key here is **ACTIVE READING**, i.e., thinking about what you read, not simply 'skim reading', so it is vital to write things down as you go along. On the day before the exam, revise your single summary sheet (you can put these on cards if you prefer) and test yourself on how much you can recall quickly.

How to answer exam questions

Contrary to what you might think, the people who set the papers **WANT** you to succeed!! Since they can't give too much away, the questions are **ALWAYS** worded in a way that points you to the specific parts of the course. This is why some exam questions don't seem to read properly.

There are two main ways to increase your chances of passing:

1. **Answer the actual question set.** Many students answer what they **THINK** is there, rather than what the question says. It is tempting to write down everything you know about a topic; you must ensure that what you write is **RELEVANT** to the question. Take some time to read the question several times before answering. Underline the key words in the question: for example, in this question.

To what extent are claims that abortion is available 'on demand' in England & Wales justified and what ethical considerations arise in applying the current provisions under the Abortion Act 1967 (as amended)?

The key words are 'to what extent', 'abortion on demand', 'justified', 'ethical considerations', 'applying the current provisions', 'Abortion Act 1967'. This question basically asks you to consider to what extent the claims are justified, and what the ethical considerations are. It also points you to a specific piece of legislation.

It can be worthwhile re-wording the question to draw out the meaning. So, a student attempting this question will need knowledge of the Act, an understanding of 'abortion on demand' claims, and will have to show an appreciation of counterarguments to the claim. Also, a discussion of the ethical considerations will be required. So, the question will point you to the parts of the course which discuss the Abortion Act, and the arguments for and against its application.

2. **The other way to improve your chances of passing is to structure your answer properly.** Your answer should have an introduction (how you are going to answer the question); a main discussion (your answer) and a conclusion (show how you have answered it). The good thing about this approach is that you must consider the question at least 3 times while answering it; this reduces the chances of not answering the question set.

It is helpful to think of these types of questions as mini essays. You won't need a reference page (though it would be great to add one if you can), and your references to other authors and theories in the answer will be short (i.e., author name and year). This will allow the marker to see easily what your answer is and you will gain credit for structuring your answer clearly. A good structure also guides you to structure your thoughts too, so helps improve the quality of your answer.

A combination of scheduled revision and consideration of the above points should greatly help you take control of the exam process, so that it is seen as part of the learning process and not as a modern form of academic torture! Good luck with your exam and if you need further advice, please contact your mentor.