

Practical Tips for Exam Questions

by Tamer Khalil, PhD Student



1- Practical tips for addressing Multiple-Choice and Short-Answer questions:

- **First sweep.** Read through the questions fairly rapidly, noting the correct answer in those you can attempt immediately.
- **Second sweep.** Go through the paper again, checking your original answers, and spend time thinking about uncertain answers. Leave questions you are still uncertain about at this stage.
- **Third sweep.** Now tackle the difficult questions and those that require longer to answer. At this stage, whether you should guess answers depends on the marking regime being used.

2- Tips for dealing with numerical questions:

- **Read the problem carefully.** Be certain of what is required as an answer before starting.
- **Analyse what kind of problem it is.** Which approach will be applicable? In formula-based questions, a favourite trick of examiners is to make you rearrange a familiar equation before you can work out the answer. Another is to make you use two or more equations in series.
- **Check that you have, or can derive, all the information required.** It is unusual, but not unknown, for examiners to supply redundant information. So, if you decided not to use some of the information given, be confident about why you don't require it.
- **Decide on the format and units in which to present the answer.** This is sometimes suggested to you.
- If a problem appears complex, **break it down into component parts.**
- **Never give up.** Even if you think you can't complete the answer, don't give up.

3- Practical tips for Essay-Style assessments:

- **Be aware of instruction words for assignments and exams.** You must take the whole question into account when answering.
- **Make a brief plan** before you begin to write to help you to structure your answer.

- **Keep your writing simple.** If you are to stick to your exam strategy, you must not lose valuable time creating an attention-grabbing piece of writing. You won't have time or space to refine your answer in the same way as you would with a piece of coursework. Don't labour the introduction with fine phrases – get straight to the point of the question and give your response to it.
- **Balance your effort appropriately.** For example, in exam answers your introduction need not be overly long. Most marks would be awarded for the main body and conclusions, so spend more time and brainpower on them.
- **Focus on providing evidence of deeper thinking.** This will help you gain better grades. You can gain marks for:
 - supplying additional and relevant detail at the expected depth;
 - providing an analytical answer rather than a descriptive one;
 - giving enough evidence of reading around the subject, by quoting relevant papers and reviews and mentioning author names and dates of publication;
 - considering all sides of a topic/debate, and arriving at a clear conclusion – you may have to take into account and explain two or more viewpoints. And possibly weigh them up.
- **Make sure you aren't losing marks due to poor presentation.** Despite the time pressure, exam answers need to be legible and clearly laid out. If feedback indicates that tutors are having problems in reading your work, or consider it untidy, paying attention to this could be easy way of gaining marks.

Manage your time wisely in an exam.

In advance, take a look at the rubric of past papers and plan how long you should spend on various sections/questions.

Then in the exam, keep to your time plan.