

Preparing for online open book exams: advice from Learning Development

1. What are open book exams?

An open book exam is a type of assessment that allows you to access materials, such as notes from your module, your module reading and lecture content, while answering the questions. In most cases you are not invigilated and you can access your exam online and submit it within a specified time period. The time period will be decided by your department and you will be told in advance how long you have to complete your exam.

Open Book Exams are designed to assess higher-order learning by asking you to apply the knowledge you have learned, and to analyse, compare or evaluate information. They test your ability to use relevant information to present a solution or argument. You will be required to demonstrate your analytical and critical thinking.

As with any exam, you will need to revise in advance and consolidate your learning. Revision techniques you have used previously will come in useful and you will have an opportunity to develop some new ways of consolidating your knowledge and thinking. Because you will have information available to you during your exam, your preparation will involve putting this into a format that you can access when you need it. This type of preparation will not involve memorising information but ensuring that you understand it and can apply it to a specific question or task.

2. How should I prepare for an open book exam?

The following are suggestions and prompts to help you find a way of preparing that suits you.

Make sure you understand the assessment brief

Check the assessment brief carefully as soon as you can. Find out more about the format, for example, how many words you will have to write and in what style. Check how you will be expected to reference the information that you use. Find out if you will have a choice of questions and how the exam will be marked.

Prepare revision notes

- a. Prepare concise notes from your course material so as to have key information to hand. You can create and personalise your notes in the way that suits you best and helps you find what you need on the day. Consider your options for condensing information – you could use hand-written notes, digital note making tools, charts, diagrams, visuals, colour coding, spoken word or other ways that work for you. Keep in mind what you want to access on the day of the exam and how you will do this while working at your screen.
- b. You will need to make sure you have a good overview of the topics you expect to come up, including key information, concepts, authors, researchers, theories, ideas, movements, and case studies. Summarise what you have learnt and make connections between the information so that you can bring it together to respond to the exam questions. Be ready to reference your sources in the format require, if needed.
- c. If you are not sure what to focus on in your revision, check the learning outcomes for the module and talk to your tutor and other students to find out more.

Think, talk, practise

- d. Create opportunities to think and talk about the content of your modules. This can help you clarify your knowledge and your views on what you have learnt. It can be useful to focus on the

hardest area to understand and try to develop your understanding. Talk with people on your course or tell your friends and family about your learning.

- e. Build your writing skills. As with other academic contexts, your writing will need to be succinct, precise, clear, and grammatically correct. If you want to discuss how to improve your academic writing, contact your [Faculty learning developer](#) or [English language development](#) for an appointment or details of workshops.
- f. Practise for the exam. Find out what it feels like and what adjustments you need to make to ensure you reach your potential. You might find that you want to develop your fast typing skills or change your note making techniques. You might need to build up your mental and physical stamina, through further practice and preparation.
- g. If available, check [past papers](#) and example questions to see what format the exam is likely to take. Use any opportunities set up by your department to practise.

Prepare your study space and your mental space

- a. Organise and locate all the information you need for the day. Make sure it is in a format that is quick to access. Everything you need should be easily to hand. Consider whether you prefer to view this on your screen or to have printed things out or prepared hand-written notes.
- b. Create a clear, calm, tidy space. This might require negotiation with others who you live with. Give others plenty of notice about your exam so that they know you will be busy and not to disturb you.
- c. Make sure the technology is working. If you have any concerns, address this well before the exam. Check in advance how you are supposed to notify the department if there is a problem.
- d. If you have any concerns about circumstances that may affect your ability to perform well, check the current advice from Student and Education Services on [exceptional circumstances](#) and contact the relevant person in your department well in advance of the exam.

3. Managing your time during the exam.

- a. Get in the zone and focus. This requires preparation and practice, as with other endurance activities, such as sport or challenging work.
- b. Work out timings for each part of the exam. Decide whether to start with the most difficult sections first, or whether you prefer to get going with the more straightforward questions.
- c. Allocate the time you want to spend on the exam. Work out the best time for you to start and finish, when to take breaks and when to eat and sleep. Work in a rhythm that suits you and make sure you rest. Keep your mind fresh by taking breaks.
- d. Know when to let go. If you have perfectionist tendencies and find it hard to let go, set yourself a strict time limit.
- e. Control anxiety and negative thinking using techniques that work for you. If your anxiety starts to feel overwhelming, seek advice or check the self-help materials available on the University's [Counselling and Mental Health Service](#) pages.