

OPEN BOOK EXAMS

What are open book exams?

While traditional (closed book) exams require recall and memorisation, **open book exams** usually allow you to take text books, journal articles and/or notes into the venue. As such, they focus on your understanding of the unit materials and your ability to synthesise and apply information in specified situations.



This survival guide identifies some expectations associated with open book exams and provides strategies for success.

What do your examiners expect?

Because you can bring materials into the venue, examiners will usually expect a higher standard of response than in a closed book exam.

Most of all, they will expect you to be **organised** and **prepared**. Being organised allows you to plan your time and quickly find data, quotes, examples or arguments to construct your answers. Being prepared means you will understand the unit material and be able to apply it to new situations.

Together, being organised and prepared means you can provide accurate, thoughtful answers that make good use of supporting evidence – all within the time limit!

TIP

Find out from your unit coordinator exactly what you are allowed to bring into the exam and whether you need to reference.

Preparing for an open book exam

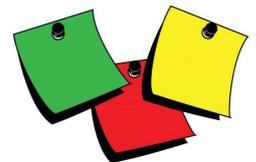
As with any test, preparation is important for open book exams. Make sure you:

- **Prepare thoroughly:** study all the topics to be tested as thoroughly as you would for an ordinary exam.
- **Check the rules:** ensure you know what materials you can bring into the exam.

TIP

Don't spend too much time thinking about model questions or model answers. The key is to be flexible and adaptable.

- **Understand your texts:** familiarise yourself with texts and their layout so you can use your exam time efficiently.
- **Create summaries:** write summaries of key points on separate sheets of paper.
- **Create data/formulae sheets:** list data and formulae on separate sheets of paper for easy access.
- **Compile your own notes:** organise your "open book" so you can locate what you need as quickly as possible.



TIP

Organise your notes in a way that works for you. Some common techniques include:

- Using colour coding and post-it notes to highlight important sections;
 - Writing your own notes and comments in the margins of texts; and
 - Creating index cards so you can find and access relevant materials quickly.
- **Plan your exam time:** find out how many questions you have to answer and plan how much time to spend on each.

Sitting the exam

As with any exam, make sure you are well rested, have eaten beforehand and arrive in good time. In addition, make sure you:

- **Plan your responses:** read each question carefully and allocate time for each one. If you take a few minutes to plan, you will have a better chance of writing a well-structured answer.

TIP

Answer the question as it is written, not the question you wish had been asked.

- **Start with a strong response:** answer the questions you are confident about first. Leave more complex and difficult questions for later in the exam.
- **Manage your time:** keep to your time allocation plan. Don't go over the time you have planned for each question.
- **Use quotations (sparingly):** quotations can illustrate a point, confer the author's authority or act as a discussion prompt. However, extensive quoting may detract from your point or argument.

TIP

Use quotation marks whenever you include a direct quotation from one of your sources.

- **Check your answers:** leave a few minutes to re-read your answers for errors and to check your argument flows.

Dos and don'ts



DO

- **Check practical details:** make sure you know the time, location, length and exam conditions (including what materials you can bring to the venue and if referencing is required).
- **Be aware of the time:** time (not content) is the limiting factor in open book exams. Use it wisely. 
- **Focus on structure:** follow the format used in your discipline. Usually this entails writing an introduction, body and conclusion.
- **Write critically:** use explanations, examples and quotes to demonstrate your understanding of the question and your ability to synthesise and apply the course material to it.



DON'T

- **Bring everything:** think strategically about what to bring into the exam. Taking too many materials will make it more difficult to find what you need.
- **Over-answer:** because you have materials on hand, it is tempting to repeat as much content as possible. Instead, aim for concise, accurate, thoughtful answers based in evidence.
- **Panic:** if you are prepared and organised, you will give yourself the best chance of succeeding in your open book exam.

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