

LEARNING TO LOVE EXAMINATIONS

Exam success really depends on a few key factors:

- Structuring an essay and making a clear, solid and reasoned argument
- Knowing what you plan to say in advance and having rehearsed the arguments well in your head
- Ability to recall particular facts (e.g. names of cases, judges etc) under the pressure of examination conditions by learning particular memory techniques
- Being able to figure out what particular topics you are particularly strong on and, consequently, where you're likely to score highest
- Being able to predict what questions might appear on the day
- Ability to work against a ticking clock
- Confidence

Each of these factors come together to help you do well in what is really quite an artificial and arbitrary assessment of academic ability. In many ways, exams are completely unfair as they positively discriminate against people who have good exam technique and negatively discriminate against individuals who know their subject but who have poor technique or who can't perform particularly well under the pressure of an examination hall. You can't change any of this so accept it and remember that there has to be some way to grade people and assess their knowledge and the easiest way is through formal examinations. Bear in mind, there is some poor soul who has to mark papers at the end of the day. This work gets farmed out to people who may be fairly specialised in their area but don't get paid massive amounts to mark the papers and are pretty bored and not really looking forward to reading your work. In that sense, it's a plus if you are able to engage them and make it really easy for them to realise you know what you're talking about. It's like a job interview: you pick up quite quickly if the candidate is likely to make the grade. Take their hand and walk them through it.

Structuring an essay

The golden rule with essay writing is to make it absolutely crystal clear what you're saying. This sounds obvious but many people have a tendency to feel they need to regurgitate irrelevant facts simply because they have learned them or simply ramble because of the pressure of the situation. Remember again, the person reading your answer is bored so take him/her by the hand and show him/her that you know what you're talking about. Always think in your head: what is it I'm really trying to say? Also READ THE QUESTION and answer it. So many people don't do this and examiners *really* hate it.

The structure of any decent essay is like a pop song. It has an introduction then the main bit (like verse and chorus) and then an outro which is the conclusion. The best advice I was ever given at school on writing essays is this: (1) say what you're going to say in the essay in your introduction; (2) say it in the main body and (3) tell them what you've said in your conclusion.

The introduction picks up the question and may summarise your argument. If you want to show off a bit then it's always a good idea to discuss the question itself. Is anything implied by it? Or are there any assumptions made in the question? Also, tell the examiner how you're interpreting the question or if you think there are any ambiguities contained in the wording. Usually in examination questions, they're pointing to something – whether it's a received opinion or an academic controversy – and they're inviting you to say “Yes, I know what you're getting at here and isn't it interesting?” Once you've discussed the question very briefly summarise the argument you're about to make (the

'what you're going to say.')

The middle section is the meat between the two slices of bread and is where you'll demonstrate the breadth of your knowledge and your ability to recall detail. In most subjects, philosophy, history, literature etc. then you're being invited to weigh up two sides of an argument. For example, if the question was the famous quote from Michael Howard that "Prison works" and you're just told "Discuss" then you'd make a case for and against. In the intro you'd summarise this and a smart answer would question what the word 'work' really means here. Is the statement 'prison works' rather glib because it doesn't tell us anything about how a prison *should* work? And does it really assume everyone is implicitly in agreement on this when, in fact, they may not be?

Start with the for and consider the strongest arguments. Make each paragraph focus on a particular point and stick to discussing just that.

So, let's consider arguments for prison:

- Prison is a deterrent as the loss of an individual's liberty should act as a deterrent. (Here is an opportunity to go into detail about sentencing and assumptions that people are rational agents.)
- Prison as retributive justice. (Societies have long held notions that people who breach well-established rules have to suffer sanctions. In some societies such as under systems of Sharia Law these may include physical pain or loss of limbs/life. Same rules apply in Old Testament – the God of Vengeance. Prison is an institutionalised way of 'hurting' people in order to deter them for committing the offence again)
- Taking an offender out of circulation. If prison doesn't rehabilitate the offender then at least it takes them out of circulating with the general population where they could do harm. Some offenders are repeat offenders and it's the only way to stop them constantly committing crime and the public deserve some respite. Some crimes are so heinous that the offender must, for the greater good of society, be removed from that society altogether. (Other institutions such as secure units and mental institutions work on the same principle and many offenders are equally a danger to themselves as well as others.)

There's 3 fairly good arguments. Obviously, the length of time you spend discussing each one or the number of arguments you're making is constrained by time. In some cases, there may almost be a checklist of things you're expected to trot out. If the list is long then don't labour each point but give a head nod to the examiner that you know what you're talking about and assume he knows this stuff too so you don't need to massively *over-explain* it to him.

In the second half of the middle section you'll put the counter argument:

- If prisons work then it is logic to think the prison population would be reducing but empirical evidence points to the opposite. Back this up a useful statistic or two
- Prisoners generally have a high recidivism rate which itself is *prima facie* evidence prison doesn't work – if they did then people wouldn't reoffend?
- Whilst prison takes people out of circulation, this is futile if you don't equip them with skills to deal with being released so it is self-defeating
- Many prisoners may be committing offences due to factors which appear outside their control (eg poverty, drug addiction) so is this a compassionate or moral way to deal with them? Also, doesn't this undermine the assumption that agents are rational?
- Prison is extremely expensive (quote some statistics or surveys to really impress) and does the taxpayer get value for money if so many prisoners re-offend

In the conclusion you quickly list the points you made in favour and against. Now the fun begins because you answer the question by deciding where you stand on the issue and which side of the argument you find more compelling and why. You can get political here or point to a wider moral context and talk about the philosophical underpinnings of notions of justice if you really want to get deep and pick up top marks.

Knowing what you plan to say in advance

The examination hall is a performance. It's nerve-wracking as it's the first night and you've been learning your lines but you don't know how well it's actually going to go. Fortunately, unlike theatre no one is actually watching over your shoulder so the first thing to do to get rid of nerves is spend 5-10 mins dumping anything that you needed to memorise on to paper before you start answering anything. If you're revising well you should have prepared essay plans and you keep reducing those plans until you can boil an essay down to a set of bullet points on an index card. Index cards are good because you can test yourself or get someone else to test you. Write the topic on one side and on the other the set of points you need to remember on that topic when you're actually there writing the essay in the exam for real. Use different coloured index cards for different subjects. Keep the cards together in a plastic wallet or a box and maybe copy out a set to take around with you so any spare five mins you can test yourself. This is all great organisation and builds confidence.

Of course, it can be hard to remember what you're planning to say on the day under the stress conditions and with lots of adrenaline pumping. One technique I used a lot was acronyms and visualisation. Let's go back to our essay on prison. I need to remember 3 positives and let's boil these down to single words: Deterrent, Retributive and Circulation. D-R-C. Let's think of something that works for that. It could be 'Democratic Republic of Congo' or it could be 'Dave reads Chekhov'. Visualise the story and connect it with prison. So think of very happy (positive), smiling prisoners in Africa or think of your mate, Dave, who's really pleased he's discovered the plays of Chekhov and is now constantly reading them whilst serving a long sentence for armed robbery. The more weird or whacky the image the more it will stick in your head but close your eyes and really picture it. Now, do the same for the opposite Reducing (but maybe D instead for down as we have an 'R' next), Recidivism, Skills, Addiction, Expensive. Shuffle them round... you get READS so you could just use this word and think of a prison governor as he *reads* a very negative parole assessment to you as you're hoping to be released. It doesn't matter what story you concoct but visualising it really helps. These will just be cues for you to remember the points once you get in there and whole the function of them is to make you not panic and not think "I can't remember the point." If you do forget what the letter stands for then give yourself a couple of minutes calm thinking time and think of all the possibilities. If you still struggle then leave it and come back to it. I used to use index cards a lot – admittedly, not as much as I used to use Class A drugs – but I'd have them on me right up to the last minute and I'd be constantly checking them. Then once I'd got into and I was allowed to start writing I'd jot all that stuff I'd memorised onto a scrap piece of paper. That way, you let yourself think "I don't have to stress about remembering stuff now and I can relax a bit, focus and maybe even enjoy yourself." You've rehearsed this stuff in your head now many times during revision, you've got your notes dumped on scrap paper which you can use selectively so now it's show time.

Ability to recall particular facts

People generally over-estimate the importance of detailed facts in exams. In history for example, it's important to remember names and dates but the wider narrative and argument is more important. In computer science, people often think the syntax of a programming language is important but

actually when I interview I look for people who have a good conceptual grasp of ideas. Facts you can Google at the end of the day. In law I imagine knowing cases, participants in cases, judges, summaries etc are all important but just splurging them out because you happen to know them won't get you top marks. Also, if you sprinkle them sparingly it looks like you know the detail but you're not going to get bogged down in it because you find the actual arguments and concepts at play more interesting – its what I call 'The Iceberg Theory' as it implies you may know more than you actually do but, hey, nothing wrong with being a confidence trickster in exams. You can use the same techniques discussed for recalling bullet points:

- If you need to know something happened in 1997 then associate it in your mind with Tony Blair coming to power or Oasis releasing 'Wonderwall'
- If you need to remember a prison costs £200m to build then associate it with something else where 200 has resonance (maybe 200 people in your year at school? Picture them all in HMP Wandsworth together. It doesn't matter. Psychologists have shown visualisation is really powerful.)
- Rhyming can also work – think how cockney rhyming works. You can connect two concepts you need to remember together by thinking of some stupid rhyme in your head. The more stupid or weird it is then the more it's likely to lodge in your short-term memory.

Working Out Your Strengths

There will always be subjects where you think you understand the arguments better than others. Usually, in essay-based subjects you get a choice of questions – maybe 8 or 10 – and you'll be asked to answer only three. This is important because once you've looked at the paper for the first time then you need to carefully consider what you're going to answer. This is *really* important. Think about it like this: you have some resources, money say, and you want to get maximum value of it. So don't rush this decision. The adrenaline is pumping but tell yourself you are cool under fire and you won't be rushed into making a rash decision. It's horrible to start answering something then figure out you've answered the wrong question as you can't get that time back. Of course, you can actually decide what you'd really *like* to answer beforehand but on the day you may not be lucky. We'll consider this later when we talk about predicting questions. But don't rush into writing anything. Read ALL the questions and mark a star by ones which you think you can answer and a double star by ones you think you can answer well. If you look at a question and it really freaks you out then scribble it out – re-reading it will just freak you out. Ideally, you're looking for 3 double starred questions but it may well not happen like that on the day. It's important to rank your questions though in favour of what you'll do best. Do this one first. Also, there's nothing to say you *have* to answer in the order they are on the paper. Don't rush this first essay and at the end you'll be confident you've got that one in the bag. Do your second favourite next and try to do it to the best of your ability. The third one you might well be weak on but do the best, sticking to the script and this is a good time to bullshit a bit by taking apart the question in your introduction for longer than you might otherwise. You're doing this because you're maybe a bit thin on detail but, trust me, examiners love this kind of thing because you're engaging with the question in a way that most people don't. Talk about the semantics of the questions. What do the words actually mean? On the third one, if you're really stuck then take a risk and answer it in a way that might be unusual or a novel take on the idea. But DO answer the question.

Being Able to Predict Questions

Exam questions are pretty much cliches. In A-Level history then any paper on the Second World War is going to ask “To what extent was the rise of Hitler due to the severity of the peace deal

imposed on Germany after they lost the First World War.” That subject is something which there's loads of writing on and it's an established academic 'controversy'. To do well on that, you'd be able to trot out the arguments for and against, name a few historians who subscribe to the arguments one way or another and then end it with a nice punchy conclusion where you express your own preference and opinion (supported by argument.) People who set examinations are pretty lazy on the whole and just tend to set the same questions year after year. They just dress them up in different clothes by wording them differently or giving them a slightly different slant. (I sat the Oxford Entrance exam and that was pretty mental. The questions were kind of about anything and they expected you to pick up the question and run with it and say something. I remember one question was “God is a woman and she is black.” Crazy! But you can talk about that in a million different ways – gender theory, anti-racism or civil rights, religious symbolism, the poetry of Maya Angelou – and have some fun with it and that's what they are looking for.)

As with anything where there's a degree of randomness – the weather, financial markets, horse-racing – your best predictive tool is looking at data for what happened in the past. Past papers are your friend here. You could basically do no work and just look at papers and question spot and scrape a pass on this alone. Go and get 5-10 years' worth of past papers and study them in detail. Also, if you have time look at past papers for other universities if you can. For each question try to categorise it into subject. Sometimes this can be hard as they will mingle two subjects. But those categories into a spreadsheet and work out how often out of ten years a subject came up. Obviously, if it came up 7 out of 10 years then you've got a 70% chance you'll get that question on the day. You'll quickly discover some subjects come up in one form or another almost every time. Others are more rare. Again, think about where you're going to invest energy learning and rehearsing your arguments vs how likely that is to come up. This is all about efficient deployment of resources. Also think about what an essay which scored a pass would get vs what an essay which scores a distinction will get. What's the special sauce that is going to make you look better than your peers? Beware of curve-ball questions too where it *appears* to be asking about something but is actually asking about something else: this is a trap which has been set for you to walk into.

Working Against the Clock

Exams are obviously timed so it's important to get used to working under those conditions. The best way to do this is to set yourself mock exams. If the exam is 3 hours and you have to write 3 essays then you'll need at least 15 minutes preparation to do your mind dump of your essay plans (even ones you won't necessarily use because you're freeing up mind space) and to really carefully consider the questions. Buy yourself a digital stopwatch and make sure you can now write a really good essay in 50 minutes - 45 minutes is better as your last essay may take longer. You don't *have* to keep writing up to the very last minute; in fact, it's always good to have at least a spare ten minutes at the end to re-read everything and make sure you haven't written something wrongly or left out a vital word which might completely change the meaning of a sentence and lose you valuable marks. If you can't remember a fact when you're writing then put a little note in the column at the side as it might come to you when you're writing another essay and you can go back and insert it. (One of my economics tutors told me a funny story about an African student who used to write things about Jesus loving the examiner at the end – sadly, you don't get extra marks for this.) When you're doing your mocks also try to make the conditions as realistic as possible so do it in quiet library with no distractions. Occasionally look at the stopwatch so you know by minute 20-22 you should be on to your counter-argument and you can speed up or even slow down a bit as need be if you want to gather your thoughts. All this stuff is confidence building. When you become good at it, you'll give yourself a 2 minute break between essays, have a swig of water and think “Right, on to the next.”

Confidence

Confidence is basically down to preparation. Preparation is in turn down to organisation. The more you prepare, the more you're going to feel like you know what you're doing when you get into the examination hall. The more organised your preparation the better. It sounds obvious but some people really freak out. Visualisation can help here: in the days leading up to the exam then visualise yourself in the hall. If you can then visit the place where you'll be sitting the exam so it's familiar. Visualise yourself sitting in there, turning over the paper and feeling really confident and good about yourself. You've learned your lines and done the rehearsal and now it's show time. Don't worry if you're nervous on the day, that's good. If you don't feel confident then fake it; just *act* like you're confident as the subconscious mind really can't tell the difference. Take anything in with you which you think will help you. I used to go through two packs of chewing gum and i'd have a couple of packs of those dextrose sweets to give my brain energy and a bottle of mineral water to keep myself hydrated. It's ritualistic in a way. Some people bring in mascots and all that nonsense. Other people wear their lucky pants on the day. It's the same in sport: do whatever works for you. But you will feel most confident if you know your stuff – on the day there's always an element of luck but embrace that and enjoy it. Think of the guy who's going to read your paper and him smiling and nodding as he reads what you've said. Maybe you've even remembered some interesting ways of phrasing something that's catchy and punchy and makes your argument even stronger.