

Types of exam questions and tips for handling them



Multiple choice questions

These questions are questions or statements followed by a list of alternative answers to choose from. When answering multiple choice type questions:

- Check the number of questions so that you allow enough time to answer them all.
- Read the questions carefully.
- Try to think for yourself what the answer is before looking at your choice of answers.
- Read every alternative before choosing an answer.
- If you are unsure about an answer, use a process of elimination. Work out which ones are definitely wrong. You can usually rule out one or two options by doing this.
- Don't get stuck. If you don't know the answer, move on and come back to it later.
- When using computerised answer sheets, make sure you line up your answer with the right question (a ruler is a useful tool for this).

Example

Multiple choice exam questions require students to:

- (a) write a short and concise answer in one or two sentences.
- (b) choose one answer from a list of alternative answers or responses.
- (c) write a response that follows the conventional structure of an essay.
- (d) read all the alternatives before choosing an answer.

Correct answer: (b)

Short answer questions

These questions need a short and concise response. They are often designed to test recall of specific facts.

- Pay close attention to instructional words (the words that tell you what you need to do e.g. explain, define, analyse). See [Common instruction words you will see in assignments Quick Guide](#) for more information.
- Look carefully at the limiting words in the question so that you know what to concentrate on.
- Allocate more time to questions worth more marks.
- Keep it brief – don't include irrelevant information.
- Make sure paragraphs have a main idea, supporting ideas and a concluding sentence.
- Use point form where appropriate.

Essay questions

These questions require an essay response. In exams essay questions don't usually come with a specified word limit. You need to judge how long your answer should be by using clues like how many marks the question is worth and whether it is a compulsory or optional question. You are also restricted by how much time you have left in the exam.

- Analyse the question. Look for the topic, the instructional words and any limiting words.
- Work out when you should finish the essay and write the time down as a reminder.
- Spend some time planning your essay.

Academic Skills Quick Guide

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- Use your plan to write a clear introduction that tells the reader what the essay is about and what the main points you are going to discuss are. If you get lost in the middle of the essay you can always come back to your introduction to get yourself back on track.
- Use a proper essay structure: a clear introduction, one (or two at the most) body paragraphs for each main point, a conclusion that summarises what you have talked about and how significant it is. Go to [A model essay structure Quick Guide](#) for more information on essay structure.
- Show evidence and a clear line of reasoning. You can do this by using good linking words (see [Connecting your ideas: linking words Quick Guide](#)).
- If you are running out of time, give an outline in point form of what you were going to say in the rest of your essay. If you have written a clear introduction this will be quite easy.

Example

Question 5 (10 marks):

Multiple choice and short answer questions are good for testing facts but essays are better for testing reasoning. Discuss.

(**Note:** The question is only worth 10 marks so it will be a short essay.)

Open book exams

In an open book exam you are allowed to take some texts/materials into the exam and you can use these to help you to answer the questions.

- Don't be fooled by the words *open book*! You must be well prepared and know your material. If you try to look up everything you need to know during the exam you will never finish. The open books are there to refresh your memory and double-check things. It's too late to learn new information.
- When revising, remember to tag, bookmark or index relevant information so that you can find it quickly.
- Notes or texts should be used to support your answer, not to find your answer.
- Find out exactly what you are allowed to take into the exam and make sure you have your own copy of the permitted texts/material.

Related Quick Guides

[Common instruction words](#), [A model essay structure](#), [How to write a good introduction](#), [Connecting your ideas: linking words](#)