

# 163 TIPS FOR IMPROVING YOUR MARKS IN EXAMINATIONS

Note: These tips work for most people most of the time. Because individuals differ, you might find something does not work well for you. In this case, after giving it a fair trial, drop it.

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### 1. THE PERIOD IMMEDIATELY BEFORE THE EXAM

If you have been working steadily throughout the term or semester, for example regularly rereading your class and lecture notes, reading new materials and making notes from them, filing all the information you have about each topic together and going over your materials topic by topic, then you are already in good shape to face the exam. Well done! Now read on.

1. If you have not worked steadily, then start by reading your old notes now. Starting is the hard part; putting this off is easy and the mind can always think of things that are more attractive than work. Fight it! Do it!! Begin now!!!
2. Unless you have no notes at all, this is not the time to be making notes, other than for your ongoing lecture or class room work. It is usually better to revise steadily all the work you have done, rather than go off to libraries reading new material. The payoff from revision is usually greater in terms of gaining exam marks.
3. About four weeks before the exams begin you could usefully make a revision timetable and start to follow it at once.
4. In your revision timetable, make sure that each subject in which you will be examined gets roughly the same amount of time.
5. Allocate a bit more time to the subjects you are weaker in, to bring them up to strength. It is tempting, but not as useful, to revise heavily in the subjects you like the best.
6. Make sure that you get some time off for exercise and enjoyment, away from studying, but keep this time to a reasonable amount only. Saturday or Sunday off, as well as two evenings a week not studying, should be ample relaxation time for many when this close to the exams.
7. Do not try to study for hours on end without a break. Sheer input of time is not the aim: maximum output of material learned is your goal. Most people seem to do best with revision periods of about 45 minutes, with a maximum of perhaps an hour and a quarter.

8. Try not to revise one subject for a whole evening, but take perhaps two subjects, with a rest in between. If however you find it irritating to stop and are so interested in what you are doing that you wish to go on with the first subject, then for you one subject per evening is right. Individuals just differ on this.

9. Your rest periods between study sessions should be at least ten minutes but not more than half an hour. Longer than that you are really goofing off, not maximizing your learning capability.

10. In the rest periods between studying, try to do something different; make a cup of coffee and listen to music; vacuum clean your room and make the bed (ouch!); do some work in the garden; wash up; take the dog for a short walk..... whatever fits your needs best. If you can get some physical effort into this "rest" period, it often seems to help your studying later.

11. It is usually a bad idea to work through the night; and to try to mug up a semester's work by staying awake for 36 hours is plain stupid. It will exhaust you and leave you in poor shape to sit an exam where you want to give of your best.

12. Take note of the time of day when you naturally feel low and try not to use it for study purposes. I personally have always found that around 4 p.m. to 5.30 p.m. are not good times for me. My energy is low and I cannot tackle anything new with enthusiasm. If you have a similar down-time, schedule that for rest and relaxation rather than study. But do not try to persuade yourself that 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. is your problem time!

13. It is worth learning a relaxation technique and practicing it, perhaps twice a day, in order to keep your stress levels down and improve your ability to study. You can do this between your study sessions if you find it helps.

14. If you have a study-buddy, someone you can bounce ideas off, explain things to and listen to their views, then you can revise as a pair, playing valuable learning games.

15. If your study-buddy is of the opposite sex, or you fancy them, make sure you really are studying and not socializing in some way! Save your smooching or whatever for non-study periods.

16. It does not have to be one study-buddy you work with, there could be three or four of you learning together just as usefully, but two can work well together and it is easier to organize.

Here is a list of useful things to do with your buddy that can improve your learning and exam marks.

17. Choose your general subject then each takes the same topic and reads silently through their individual lecture notes for, say, 10 minutes (or 20 minutes, whatever you find useful). Then close your notes and one explains what they know to the other. You can either have number two interrupt and question number one; or number two can save questions to the end; or each can explain individually to the other without questions.

You can then discuss what you have learned about the topic, and argue if appropriate.

After the explanation/discussion period, you can both check for individual weak spots by opening your notes to see how well you both did.

18. Choose your general subject, then you can each read up a *different* topic within the subject beforehand. Both know what topic the other will cover. Then each person explains as much as s/he can remember to the other but without reference to notes. Then the explainer opens his or her notes and goes through, seeing what was missed and explaining that part too. This is a particularly valuable exercise for both parties.

When one has finished, if you are both exhausted, take a break. Otherwise the other person starts with his or her different topic and repeats the process.

If you did not break in the middle, take a good break after the second person has finished.

19. If you are good at, say, history and your buddy is good at geography, you can each take one topic from your favorite discipline and explain it to the other. It is a good idea to set a time limit for each person, maybe ten minutes or whatever works best for you both, up to perhaps half an hour. Then take a break, switch roles, and move to the other discipline. If after the first presentation you feel like discussing more, do it!

20. Take an old exam question paper and both mug up the same question beforehand, each independently preparing a skeleton outline answer. Then you meet up and compare outlines. Discuss any differences in approach and content. See if you can merge them into an even better answer than either individual one. Do this with as many questions as you can cope with in one study session. When you have worked your way through the whole exam paper, you can always start again with a different one. Keep all skeleton outlines, for they make excellent revision material.

21. Take the same exam paper, but instead of you both mugging up the same question, you tackle different ones, again preparing a skeleton outline answer. First try to explain your answer *without* looking at the skeleton, then do it again but this time with the skeleton in front of you. The listener may ask questions, criticize where possible and make you defend your position. Then you switch roles and the previous listener now presents his or her answer in similar fashion.

22. You both take the same exam paper and go through in advance, making skeleton outline answers to *every* question. Then you meet up and compare answers, looking at both the approach to the question and the content. You might discuss which seems the better approach, how best to organize the points in logical fashion, which points should be in and why. In the end, try to combine your views into one brilliant skeleton outline answer for each question. And pray that similar questions, come up for you! You are both gradually covering the course/exam material *and* getting practice at preparing good answers. If that doesn't improve your marks, then I don't know what will!

23. Having agreed on the subject in advance, you meet up and one asks questions of the other. The question-asker can have lecture notes, or other notes or textbook, open in order to ask a sensible question; the responder works from memory and intelligence. Then you switch roles when one gets fed up! Perhaps taking one topic within the overall subject would be useful for one questioner, then you might role switch to a different topic but within the same general subject.

On the whole, any game of this kind is an excellent way of learning and revising, and can be a lot more fun than sitting trying to read notes on one's own and feeling bored and fed up with the whole process. You can remember more by explaining something to someone else than just reading it over, particularly if your attention is apt to wander a bit.

## 2. STARTING THE DAY, GETTING THERE, AND SETTLING DOWN

24. The night before the exam, assuming that you have worked steadily towards the exam, you should try not to study at all. The small amount extra that you might learn is likely to drive out more things that you know already. For many people, it is better to relax instead.

25. It is a bad idea to go out drinking with friends or partying. You will not be at your best the next day if you do.

26. If you really feel you must study the night before, keep it simple. Look over your notes on the main lines of the subject only. If you have condensed your notes, perhaps summarized them down to cards, then you could just read over these summary notes.

27. Do not try to sit down the day before the exam and read through *everything* that you have collected about the subject. If you do, you will notice bits that you have quite forgotten and this can cause you to worry and feel tense. You do not need this!

28. Make sure your exam “kit” is ready: a few pens in blue and black (and pencils if needed - multiple choice quizzes may need a soft black pencil); a ruler; maybe a set-square or pair of compasses for some subjects; an eraser; liquid-paper white-out; a calculator; possibly some tissues; perhaps some sweets to suck; and a watch. If you know you need anything special, put that in too. Tomorrow you can just pick up your kit and run, without worrying.

29. Try to get a good night’s sleep the night before the exam. It is often a bad idea to go to bed earlier than usual, as this can keep you awake. Many people find the usual routine bed-time the best. Personally, I used to go to be about half an hour later, which seemed to help in my case.

30. Do not rely on sleeping pills or other drugs to put you to sleep the night before your exam. You will probably feel groggy the following day and your marks are likely to suffer rather than improve.

31. You need to wake up in good time on The Day. Make sure you have at least two ways of being awakened; do not rely solely on your mother shaking you or the alarm clock going off. This is belt and braces time, so make sure you have some kind of back-up alarm call. If you have only one alarm clock and live on your own but have a telephone, consider ordering a telephone wake-up call. Make the telephone wake-up later than your alarm clock.

For residents of the USA and Canada only, you can apparently get a free wake-up telephone call from “Mr. WakeUp”, at <http://www.mrwakeup.com/> As a resident of both Brisbane, Australia and London, England I have been unable to check it out personally but it looks as if you can get a free wake-up call if you can put up with five seconds of advertising. As I have not been able to try it and do not know exactly what is involved, I cannot guarantee it. But you might give it a try.

If you do not live in North America, or if you do not mind paying, most telephone companies are only too pleased to give you a wake-up call – but they will charge you for doing so.

32. Build in enough safety margin on your timing, so that you can get up leisurely, eat, travel, arrive at the room, and still have some spare time. You must not be running late. At this stage you do not need anything that adds to your stress level - and time in hand can be extremely useful for anything that might happen to go wrong.

33. Eat a decent breakfast so that you do not get hungry and to keep your energy level up. If you never normally eat anything at all in the morning, try to eat just a little for once, perhaps a small bowl of a simple cereal and a piece of fruit. If the mere idea of food first thing in the morning makes you feel ill, try eating a morsel of food a few days earlier and see if you can stomach it. If so, you should be fine to eat a little on The Day.

34. Do not fill yourself up with drinks, especially coffee or tea on the grounds it might help you with energy. It is certainly likely to help you to go to the bathroom a lot more often! This is not only annoying, it can waste time when you are out of the exam room.

35. Do not forget to take your kit of exam needs with you. A free plastic supermarket bag works well (check first for splits or holes!), weighs little, and can be crumpled in your pocket after you empty it in the exam room. Otherwise a small cardboard box or tin will suffice.

36. If you normally get a lift, cycle, or drive in, start early enough so that a traffic jam or an earlier accident will not cause you to worry, or risk being late. If you have an ancient car or motorcycle that is liable to break down, you might consider getting a reliable lift, or going by public transport for once. If you cannot get it started, you will be put under stress, just when you do not want it. If you normally go by public transport, you might take an earlier bus or train.

37. You do not want to be later, but neither do you want to be too early. Perhaps getting there 15-20 minutes before they let you in would be about right. If running late you will worry; if you are too early you might stand around fidgeting, and allowing doubts to arise.

38. Do not stand with friends talking about likely questions and answers – this can cause your stress level to rise unnecessarily. A quiet cup of coffee or a small soft drink might suit you: whatever you choose to do should make you feel relaxed and comfortable.

39. While you are waiting to be let in the exam room, look around. If you can see lots of people that you know, fine. If however everyone you see is a stranger, check to see that you are in the right place! In big schools and in many universities there may be several different venues running different exams at the same time. Now is the time to find out that you should actually be in a room five minutes walk away rather than in this one. You do not want to wait to discover this until you sit down and see an exam paper in the wrong subject. Believe me, this happens occasionally!

40. When you are let into the room, unless you are forced to sit where they place you, try to choose a seat in which you feel comfortable. Some people like to be near the front, others near the back, or by the side of the room. If you feel comfortable, you will do better.

41. Make sure you sit where you can see the board if there is a chance that instructions may be written up, and also that you can see the wall clock if you do not have your own watch.

42. Set out your kit convenient for your use. If you used a supermarket bag, cram it empty into your pocket or purse. A small cardboard box might hold it all, but be prepared for an invigilator to ask to examine it. Some awful people really do try to cheat! It is best not to put things on the floor and have to keep bending to pick them up, for that will certainly attract the attention of the invigilators!

### 3. STARTING THE EXAM: PREPARING YOUR ANSWERS

**NB** This preparation stage is the really important part of getting good marks. If you skip this stage of careful preparation, perhaps because you are impatient, conscious of time passing, and want to get on, you will not do as well as you could.

43. You must wait until you are told you can read the paper, unless you have already been informed that you can pick up paper. Once you are allowed to read it, do so. First check the name of the exam (make sure you are in the right room!), then read the instructions on number of questions you have to tackle and see if the paper is split into sections and if so, how many questions must you tackle from each. Read any other instructions – perhaps you must write on every other line or on the right-hand side of the page only. Possibly you are being asked to use a different book for each question. Just make sure you will do everything they ask for.

#### Question selection

44. First you should read through the whole paper, scanning the questions quickly to see the coverage of the questions. Then go back to the beginning and read the questions carefully this time, marking any probables and possibles lightly. If you have marked just enough questions – great! Your search is over. If you have too few, go through again to make up the required number.

45. If you have marked more than enough questions (“Attempt 4 questions” and you have marked 6) – even better! It means you have a choice. You can then reread the marked ones (only) and select those that you will eventually do. Most people find it easier to number the questions in the order they will tackle them, taking the easiest/best first.

46. Once you have chosen the questions you will tackle, you should ignore the rest of the questions henceforth. In fact I forbid you to read them again! Ignoring them will save you time and, more importantly, reduce your worries that you do not know the answers to them. So what? You are not going to try to answer them anyway!

47. Do make sure you attempt the correct number of questions. If you are asked to answer four questions and actually answer five, the last question will not be read and you have wasted valuable time. I have seen this done more than once! Remember also that if you only tackle four questions when asked for five, you are being marked out of only 80 percent maximum. It is hard to do well under such circumstances.

48. Some students find it useful to underline or circle the key words in those questions they intend to answer, in order to focus on the essentials. If this helps you, do it!

49. Once you have decided which questions you will attack, and are sure that the number is correct, you might try dividing the time available by the number of questions *plus 2* (i.e. if you have 4 questions in 2 hours, divide 120 minutes by  $(4 + 2) = 6$ , to give 20 minute slots. This 20 minutes a question will allow you the extra time you need for planning your answers before you start to write and also for editing and correcting at the end. If you are a slow writer, you might choose “the number of questions plus 1” to divide by, but it might be cutting it fine for the necessary corrections at the end. Do not just divide by the number of questions unless you plan and write fast and know that you will finish early enough to check carefully at the end.

50. The above suggestion assumes that all questions are equally weighted. If this is not the case, then you should allocate your time differently. If you have to do three questions, one worth 50 percent of the total and the other two worth 25 percent each, naturally you should allocate about as much to the first question as to the other two combined. My personal view is that the other two should get slightly more preparation time, on balance, but not much more. Remember that you still need to allow for preparation and checking over at the end.

51. Write the approximate time you should finish each question by its side on the exam paper, so that you can check to see how well you are keeping to your schedule as you write. Each time you finish writing a question, look at the paper and check to see if you are doing well.

**You need to prepare a skeleton outline of what you will say.**

52. Spending ten minutes preparing your answers carefully will earn you more marks than picking up your pen and dashing down your answers. When the exam begins you might notice some students grab their pens and start answering immediately. Relax! Those who start writing at once usually put in scrappy essays, both ill-organized, and missing some important information. You might notice that later in the exam, some of them sit scratching their heads and wondering what they can write before the end of the exam.

53. When writing your answer later, you should stick to the skeleton and not deviate.

54. The only time you can legitimately move away from the outline is if while writing your answer you suddenly remember another point or argument that you need to put in. If this happens, write that point in the proper place, then return to the skeleton outline at once.

55. When starting your outline, begin by listing whatever points come to mind; read the question a few times as you are doing this.

56. If you think of any name associated with a point (perhaps an academic, a politician or the writer of a well-known textbook) jot it down at once. You might easily forget it later under the stress of being examined. Seeing the name should remind you of the point but you can add a note to yourself, e.g. "John Doe, anti-fascist". You can then quote the person and impress the person marking your paper.

57. The order you think of the points will almost certainly not be the most logical to answer the question well. You now have to organise the list into a skeleton answer. Play about with this for a short while, numbering the points in a logical order which you will follow when you write. It is important to get a logical outline to your approach.

58. In order to achieve a logical order, try to group like with like; for example, if you have three historical reasons to explain what you have been asked, and two geographical ones, put the historical ones together, and the geographical ones together. If you have some short term reasons (or outcomes) and some long term ones, say this, then group the short ones together and the long ones together. Direct factors and indirect factors may also offer possibilities for grouping items together.

59. A straight historical account is one logical way of doing things, but it is often harder to gain excellent marks. The danger is that you fall into a simple descriptive "This went up and that went down" approach, rather than analyzing. Depending on the subject and question concerned, analysis may consist of explaining the reasons for things, showing the way something works, discussing the outcomes of events, or presenting the inter-relationship between items. It may involve suggesting the relative importance of various relationships or arguments. The historical approach, tempting though it is, is often not in your best interest, unless you are asked to "Trace the events....." or similar. Even then, try to get some analysis in!

60. Analyzing something clearly can always be relied on to get you better marks than merely describing something accurately. The sole exception is if the question starts "Describe....." and even then a little analysis at the end would often gain you more marks.

61. In your introduction, you can point what groups there are, perhaps the explanations, the causes, the effects, the results, or whatever you have been asked about in the question. In this particular case, you can say that there are several factors involved, including both historical and geographical.

62. If you need to define any terms, the introduction is the place to do it. Saying how you intend to tackle the question is also common.

63. The introduction should be short, that is, not more than one or two paragraphs long. A good rule of thumb is to start answering the question properly, i.e. start the main body of text, on the first page.

64. When writing your main section you follow the skeleton outline, keeping each group of points separate. You might use a subhead for the groups, in the above case “The historical factors” and “The geographical factors” would make neat headings. Doing this shows you have a tidy logical mind and makes it easier for the marker to follow what you are doing.
65. Always make it easy for the markers and never make their task more difficult. The person marking is already fed up before s/he got to your paper and you do not want to annoy this important person unnecessarily! After all, s/he decides your mark. Not annoying the marker means you should be particularly careful with the items numbered 66-75 below.
66. Read the exam instructions and follow them carefully.
67. Write clearly and legibly. To get good marks, it is better to write more slowly and make it legible than write rapidly but no one can read it.
68. If you have really bad handwriting, writing on every other line might help. It looks odd, but the paper you are wasting is not paid for by you.
69. Always write in ink and never in pencil.
70. Lay your essay out neatly; you might leave a blank line between major sections.
71. Use sub-headings if it helps (but not too many! That looks messy).
72. Use rulers for drawing any diagrams.
73. In complex diagrams, use more than one color, but not red. However, do not try to make it a multi-colored work of art. Three colors is often enough, e.g. black, blue and green.
74. Make any diagrams large enough to see easily. Anything about one inch square (2.5 cms) is almost certainly too small. People’s eyesight tends to deteriorate with age, and the person marking your paper might be 60 years old! Just because you can see it easily does not mean that everyone can. Depending on the complexity of your diagram, perhaps a quarter of the page might be a reasonable size.
75. Never use red ink to write the text or in diagrams (markers tend to use red and may wish to glance back to see if they have underlined or commented before they allocate you a mark).
76. You will probably find that one item on the skeleton outline will often make one paragraph when you write up your answer. This is not a hard-and-fast rule but it seems to work for most people. If you find you take two paragraphs for a point, that is fine.
77. You can either prepare one skeleton outline and then write it at once, or prepare a series of outlines for all the questions that you will tackle. The advantage of the first way is that the points are fresh in mind; the disadvantage is that when writing your answer you might suddenly think of something new and will have to asterisk the insert. If it is several pages away, you will have to number the pages quickly at the bottom and say “See insert on page 6” or whatever, when you put the big asterisk at the proper place in the text.
78. Make sure that you have answered each part of a multi-part question. If there are sections a), b) and c), and you only tackle the first two sections, you are being marked out of a maximum of only 66 percent! Such an easy but essentially silly act is throwing away marks.
79. Do not let yourself be put off by long questions. It is easier to decide how to answer a long question that is divided into segments, possibly numbered “a”, “b”, “c”.... The outline has been done for you and you simply follow it. Very short questions often need more thought and planning than long ones. A short question (“What is truth?”) may require a lot of thought on how you could even start to tackle it, let alone what sections you could divide it into.

80. If asked to comment on a quotation be particularly careful! Many quotations are put up for you to criticize or perhaps explain the limitations of the statement. It may be true in some respects but not in others and you might have to explain this. After all, what is the point of asking you to comment on something which is always true? Look at the actual words in the quotation carefully, as sometimes one of them may contain a problem that you might focus on.

#### 4. WRITING YOUR ANSWERS

81. NEVER just pick up your pen and commence answering writing when they say you can start! Time spent preparing your answer is never time wasted. It gets you more marks!
82. Unless otherwise instructed, start each new question on a new page and put the question number clearly on the left.
83. Do not leave a blank page between questions.
84. Do not write out the question; that is a total waste of your time.
85. Answer the question that is asked and not one that you wish had been asked. This means reading the question carefully, not just responding to the topic.
86. Never start, "Before I answer this I will.....". This shows an unfocussed mind and suggests that you are about to answer a question that you wish had been asked, not the one you are being forced to tackle. The examiner may then feel s/he does not want to give you a particularly good mark.
87. Ensure you have a logical approach to your answers. Do this at the planning stage.
88. Do not just put down all you know about the issue. This is a sure-fire way of getting poor marks.
89. Never think that the longer the answer, the greater the marks. A good answer might contain six reasons for something spread over a page and a half; a bad one might have three reasons spread over six pages. In this case, the shorter succinct answer gets you more marks. It also saved you valuable time. Good organization is needed of course.
90. Make sure that you have a short introduction, a main body of the answer, then a brief conclusion, summing up what you have said. Do this for every question you answer.
91. It is often a good idea to write "Introduction" and "Conclusion" and underline them, to separate them from the body of your answer. However, it tends to look a bit mechanical to some markers.
92. It can be useful to leave a double space after the Introduction, as you start the main text, and another double space before the Conclusion. This indicates a new section but avoids the perhaps mechanical "Introduction" and "Conclusion" labels.
93. When you get to the Conclusion it is a good idea to say "In conclusion,....." so that the examiner knows that you are about to sum-up. You should only do this if you have *not* written "Conclusion" as a heading.
94. Ensure that your Conclusion and Introduction are similar, but are not identical word-for-word; in particular check that they do not contradict each other!
95. In some subjects, like English or History, you generally do not need to use diagrams unless you have some particular need.
96. In some subjects, like economics, you almost certainly will have to draw diagrams. You should be able to tell this from the approach adopted by your teachers or lecturers and from your textbook. If they use diagrams, so should you.
97. If your subject allows it, try to get the occasional diagram in, perhaps a pie-chart or a bar-chart. The idea is to break up the text and make your answer look interesting to the marker, as well as to communicate facts. If your paper stands out from the average, it helps you to get marks.
98. Start by answering the question that you think you can do the best; do not answer them in the order they were asked, unless that happens to be your preferred order.

99. With your first answer, take your skeleton outline, glance over it quickly to see if you can improve it, do this if necessary, otherwise start to write.

100. Do not use abbreviations like “I’ll”, “Can’t”, “Isn’t”, “Won’t” but write out “I will”, “Cannot”, “Is not” and “Will not”.

101. Acronyms are useful, but if you use any, it is a good idea to explain the first time you use it. For example, “In the United Nations (UN)...”, allows you to use “UN” henceforth. This is particularly needed with longer or less well-known ones, like ESCAP (the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific).

102. Glance at your watch now and then, to ensure that you are not falling behind your schedule. You can check the time against the time you earlier forecast that you should be finishing that question. If falling behind, try to speed up.

103. When you have written the answer to a question it is a good idea to check at once that you have written up each part of the skeleton and not missed something out. It is easy to do this when you are nervous.

104. If you have missed something out, write it in a separate section, put a BIG asterisk where the missing bit should go in and write “Please see insert overleaf” or something similar. You can draw a balloon round the words if you wish. Add a small inverted “V” under the line in desired place. Then put a similar asterisk on the new section (i.e., the one which is to be inserted, write “Insert on previous page” or wherever, and draw a clear heavy line above and below the insert to make it stand out.

The reason for a big asterisk is that markers get bored and read exam papers quickly; you do not want the person to miss your insert completely because they are tired.

105. When you have finished your first question, go to the one that you think you can do second best (already numbered by you). If you did a skeleton outline earlier, you must look at it again and see if you can improve it, taking maybe a minute for this. Then write your second answer, checking your watch and sticking to the skeleton as before.

106. Keep your eye on the time. If you are running out of time and you realize that you cannot finish all the answers, do not panic! It is always a mistake to write up to the final bell anyway! You should always stop writing, perhaps 10 minutes before the end of the exam, and go back to read over what you have said, edit it for mistakes, look for bad spelling and missing words, and generally make it say what you originally intended.

107. If you still have half a question, or even a whole question to write and have no time, you can still get more marks by doing the following. If you have a skeleton answer prepared, write “Sorry, ran out of time” then copy the skeleton answer down to show what you would have said. The marker can see that you know the answer and will mostly allow you extra marks, often quite substantial ones. Then go back to read over and make any necessary corrections.

## **5. CHECKING OVER WHAT YOU HAVE DONE**

108. You gain more marks in the last ten minutes of every exam by reading over and editing than by just adding a few more sentences to the actual question you are answering. You are going for good marks, so use your time to the best advantage.

109. Use the last ten minutes or so for checking over what you have done:

110. Have you followed the instructions? In particular, is your name/number on the paper?

111. Have you done every part of any multi-part questions?

112. Have you said what you meant to say?

113. Are there any spelling mistakes to correct or grammar to sort out?

114. Is your meaning clear?

115. Have you any repetitions to cut out or contradictions that need rectifying?

116. Are there any illegible or hard to read words?

117. When you notice anything that can be improved, alter it at once! Cross out the mistake and write in the correction, or grab your liquid paper and whiten out the offending part. It is difficult to write immediately over liquid paper until it dries properly, so be careful not to let your correction run.

118. When you have made the correction, read the whole sentence through, to make sure it still says what you wish it to say.

119. Cross out anything that you do not want read and marked, such as an early skeleton plan, an idea that you had, or a rough diagram. It will then be ignored. Trust me! Markers never read anymore than they have to.

## 6. THE WORDS OF THE QUESTION CAN HELP YOU TO CHOOSE THE BEST APPROACH

120. You must make sure that you understand the question i.e. that you know what you are being asked for. Each question to which you have to write an answer is designed to test you as an individual, not just your memory, but your intelligence and abilities. The examiner looks to see how you approach the question, seeing if you are logical and can communicate your ideas. The actual words used in the question often indicate what your best approach should be. The words below explain what is expected of you. Sometimes more than one of the words will appear in the same question and you are being asked to do a few things.

121. I am counting all the following words and their accompanying explanation and advice as one tip. As there are 29 words, this gives you 28 extra tips!

**Account for:** Explain why something happens or has happened; give reasons for things.

**Analyze:** Discuss an issue, perhaps the cases for and against, the causes and effects, the assumptions behind it and possible consequences of it. It sometimes helps to divide the question into parts; if the question falls naturally into parts, so should your answer.

**Assess:** Give the case for and against, or the importance or unimportance, then sum up cautiously one way or the other.

**Comment:** You may need to assess the words used or proposition made. It often calls for mild criticism and you may have to explain under what circumstances it might be done, or possible results of doing it, and then what responses might be made, for instance by government or other bodies. You might often need to say whether something is important, or how important the various bits of the case are.

**Compare:** You need to say where the two items are alike and different; point out if something is very alike or different and which are important. If asked which you prefer, you must explain why you think this. Comparisons sometimes stress how alike things are; contrasts always focus on differences.

**Contrast:** Think about the differences, say what they are, and explain how or why they arise.

**Criticize:** Adopt an antagonistic approach in general, you need to disagree with the proposition, pointing out faults and disadvantages. Try to support your views with reasons, evidence, or statistics if you can remember any. Quote any names of authors that you know support your view. If you know someone who supports the proposition you have to criticize you can mention them, but preferably also name someone who opposes this person as a balance.

**Define:** Explain what it means, using as formal language as you can. If you have learned a definition, use it.

**Describe:** Say what you know about the issue. Make sure you present in a logical order.

**Differentiate:** Explain the differences between the two (or more) items you are asked about.

**Discuss:** Say what you know about the issue. Usually it means giving a case for and a case against some proposition or issue. You often do well by summing up marginally on one side, but indicating that both cases have merit. This covers you, if the marker prefers the other view!

**Distinguish:** Explain the differences between the items or propositions.

**Evaluate:** You are being asked to decide how good or bad something is; it may be how true or false, how important or unimportant, how successful or unsuccessful. You must sum up with an opinion about the issue, because you are being asked to make a judgement.

**Explain:** State clearly what is involved.

**Identify:** Point to the essential part or parts. You might have to explain clearly what is involved.

**Illustrate:** Supply examples of the proposition in the question. This might be in words, statistics, or diagrams.

**Implications:** Describe the possible hidden results of an action. Be careful to consider if there are any hidden assumptions behind the statement, as they can affect the possible results. Consider the short term and long term possibilities and it may help to divide your answer into these two time periods.

**Interpret:** Explain the meaning of something; e.g. you might be asked to interpret a set of data, a bar-chart, or a graph.

**Justify:** Supply reasons in support of an argument or event. Put in any statistics you might know. If your memory fogs and you cannot remember exactly, say if it was 60 percent or 70 percent, “approximately two-thirds” would cover it nicely.

**Limitations:** Show where something will not work, or where it will not work as well as in other areas. Consider to what groups it would not apply, or if whatever it is would run out over time (short-term/long-term differences). You are seeking areas of relevance and irrelevance and concentrating on the latter.

**Outline:** Select only the most important aspects of a topic, ignoring all minor details.

**Relate:** This word can have two meanings; either you are being asked to describe carefully, which is unlikely, or to demonstrate the connection between two or more things (relate A to B).

**Role:** Explain the part that something plays: how it fits in, what it causes, what effects it has, what it might drag in with it, what it might force to happen, or how it interacts with other people or groups.

**Significance:** Explain the meaning of something and assess how important it is. You might consider for whom it might be significant and tell the examiner!

**State:** Put down the main points of the view or argument.

**Summarize:** Select only the main points of the issue and put them in some logical order.

**Support:** Give all the reasons you can in favor of the proposition or idea.

**Trace:** Explain how something developed over time.

**Validity:** Can the statement be justified by the facts and evidence? To what extent is it true i.e., are there any limitations and what are they?

## **7. AFTER THE EXAM**

122. After you leave the exam room, it is best not to stand around and talk about what you said with your friends. They will probably say something that depresses you and makes you wish you had put that in. This will almost certainly be some fact or perhaps an idea. Your mark will not depend on the presence or absence of a single fact, and even one idea will probably not make much difference. Your mark will depend on things like how you organized your answers, how well laid out they are, and how logically you approached the question, as well as what you said.

123. Unless you are unlucky enough to have an exam shortly afterwards, it is a good idea to go off and do something totally different. You need to relax mentally and unwind. Something involving exercise is a good idea – jog, swim, play a game, walk energetically..... Anything that gets you breathing in fresh air and emptying the mind is a good thing. If your idea of relaxing is sitting in a smoke-filled room, eating cookies and watching a horror video, so be it! It's not my style, but we are all different individuals.

124. If you miss an exam for some reason, do not panic. Inform someone in authority as soon as possible: your teacher, your lecturer, your personal tutor, the faculty office, or whoever seems appropriate. There are often ways of catching up, such as resits or supplementary exams, but someone needs to know about your problem quickly. It is no good turning up six weeks later and saying you missed the exam, and asking what you can do about it.

125. If you miss an exam, a medical certificate from your doctor saying you are sick is often an acceptable excuse. Make sure that someone rings in either the same day or the following one to say that you are ill and that a certificate will be forthcoming. At the same time, they can find out what the procedure is.

## **8. STRATEGIES FOR DIFFERENT TYPES OF TESTS AND EXAMS**

Most exam are of the long essay type, which have been discussed above. But other forms of testing exist and they are becoming more popular. With shortages of staff and the availability of computers, more mechanical means of testing students are creeping in.

### **Short essays or write short notes**

126. Both require similar things from you. You plan out a skeleton answer for both and a clear, logical approach is crucial. You must write up the short essay more carefully, using formal English and making proper sentences. For short notes questions you can be briefer and separate your statements by dots or dashes, one below the other. You do not need to use perfect grammar (these are “notes”) but you must communicate unambiguously. You need not have an Introduction with short notes, but a short Conclusion is often useful.

127. Make sure you put in a few jargon words from your discipline. Some such tests use computers to mark them, and they are programmed to look for certain words in order to pass you. Saying exactly the same thing in your own words, not using any of the jargon of the discipline, can lose you marks. This is not right I know, but it can happen, and you do not wish to take any chances of lowering your overall grade.

### **Open book exams**

128. You should have read the books in advance and be familiar with their organization and layout. Do not rely on being able to go through them for the first time in the exam room. You have to be able to jump quickly to the bits you need.

129. Practice in advance, using the index in the back of each book. You can best to this by taking old exam papers and trying to locate the material you would have needed in the exam room to answer the questions. If you have no access to old papers, you should still practice; your textbook or a Study Guide might have sample questions in. Like any other skill, the more you do it, the better you get. The pay-off in the exam room from practicing in advance will be faster work, which means that you have more time to do better quality answers. Your marks are looking better already!

130. If you consult old exam papers, and listen to any tips on topics from your teachers, you can mark up likely question topics in your books in advance. If you do this using different colored paper slips that stick out (red for “Abraham Lincoln”, blue for “Civil War” or whatever), you can find the important information you might need more quickly. You can quickly remove the markers of any of your pre-marked items that are not on the exam paper.

131. If in the last two or three weeks of term, a new topic or two is unexpectedly introduced in your course and raced through, it might be the teacher has suddenly realized that this will probably (definitely?) be in the exam, it has not yet been covered, and so is rapidly teaching this. You might choose to pay special attention to such topics or questions.

### **Matching pairs of phrases in lists**

132. Read quickly down one side, then down the other, to get a feel for what is in there. Some probably matching pairs might jump into your mind. Then go through more slowly, taking the first top left side item, and go through the right hand side, one by one, looking for a likely match. Do not stop at the first possible match, as there may be a better one later. When you find the best, lightly cross it out and indicate or enter the pair in the way the exam paper demands. Then go on to the second item on the left hand side and repeat the process. Keep going down the left side in order. The further down the left you go, the fewer uncrossed items there are on the right, so it gets quicker as you go.

133. Go through the list a few times. At the end, if there are one or two items you simply do not know, and if there is no penalty for wrong marks, always guess the remaining few. You get no marks for missing out answers totally but a lucky guess will gain you a mark.

### **Fill in the gaps in sentences**

134. A lot of words or phrases can be filled into the gaps and they will make grammatical sense. Many of them, however, will be irrelevant to your exam. You should keep in mind the name of the course or subject you are being tested in, and, if relevant, the section of the course. In a macroeconomics exam you should not be filling in microeconomic answers! Bearing in mind your subject in this way, you can improve your odds of getting a sensible statement that can earn you marks.

135. Read the sentence that contains the gaps carefully, and see if it gives a clue as to bit of the subject to which it refers. In a science subject, is it, for instance, likely to be a sentence about a gas or a metal? If you can figure this out, it can help you to put in words that are sensible and relevant.

136. You need not only a sensible answer but also a likely one. In this, you can sometimes get help from the level of exam you are sitting. If you are in a geography exam at school, a Sentence like “The ..... of France, where we can see the Eiffel Tower, is.....” could well ask for “capital” and “Paris” as the correct answer. There are many possible sensible answers, such as “city” and “foreign”, or “part” and “full of foreigners”, but these would not be as good answers. The actual name of the subject being studied can sometimes be a guide too.

137. With gap filling questions, it is unlikely that two questions will come from the same area of the course. If you have already answered a question that definitely refers to the Great Lakes, then a later question that just *might* fit the Great Lakes probably refers to something else. So try to think of an alternative that would fit just as well or preferably better.

### **Multiple choice**

***Reminder: These tips work for most people most of the time. Because individuals differ, you might find something does not work well for you. In this case, after giving it a fair trial, drop it.***

138. Read the questions *very carefully* which is essential with multiple choice questions; if you misread even slightly it can lead you to choose an incorrect answer.

139. You should never waste a lot of time thinking about a particular question and sticking at it. If you cannot answer quickly, do not waste time staring and worrying about it; leave it and go on. You gain more marks by going through all the questions and answering, hopefully correctly, maybe 80 per cent of them, than only getting answering as far as question 5 out of, say, 50, and getting stranded there!

140. Multiple choice exams often involve going through several times, doing the easier ones first, then going through and through again until you have either done them all or else run out of time. If you also have essays to write or data response questions to do, when you have been through the multiple choice section once or twice, it is often worth doing one essay etc then returning to the multiple choice and going through the missing ones. The break often helps to focus the mind.

141. You need to select the *best* answer out of those offered. Possibly more than one answer fits or is true, but one stands out as being better than the others. For example, with a question like “A chair is A]. A piece of furniture; B]. Something found in houses; C]. Often made of wood; D]. A piece of furniture designed to be sat on”, all answers are valid, but D. is probably the best because it includes more that is true, so you should choose that one. Do not stop if you find a “good” answer (such as “b”), there may be a better one later (such as “d”).

142. Do not bother to annotate the answer sheet with an opinion (e.g. “Only true if it rains”); the marker is too busy to bother to read it and in many cases a computer marks multiple choice exams anyway, and it will ignore you.

143. Do not tick or fill in more than one box or circle. The computer will probably throw it out in confusion and some low-grade clerk may have to decide whether to give you a mark for it. They get tired and irritable, it is a boring job, and the person may not be feeling generous. If they conclude that you cannot even do as you have been told, they tend not to be on your side!

144. Always use a pencil to fill in the boxes if this is permitted (it usually is, but it may have to be a soft 3B or similar). This allows you to change your mind by erasing errors.

145. If you change your mind, make sure you erase the tick in the wrong box or whatever *carefully* so that only the box you think is the correct one contains the tick, cross or is filled in.

146. You can sometimes get help in deciding on the correct answer by drawing a small diagram for yourself to analyze what is going on in the question. This depends on the subject you are doing, but it is well worth trying. If you do this, cross out the diagram when you have finished with it.

147. You can sometimes shed light on some multiple choice questions by reading the rest of the exam paper, including any essay questions. The exam setters do not always notice overlaps! This process is best done in your end period, when you have done all you can, answered as many multiple choice as you know or can work out, and have checked all your written answers. You should make maximum use of any time left over.

148. With negative questions (“Which of the following gases is not inert?”) it may help you to cover up the word “not” and ask which *are* inert and cross them through lightly, to reveal the one you seek. This technique can be particularly useful with complex negative sentences.

149. If you have a choice of “All the above are correct”, and can determine that even one of the earlier choices is incorrect, you know that “All the above” must also be wrong and you have narrowed the odds by eliminating two of the offered choices.

145. Unless there are penalties for incorrect answers (in my experience this is uncommon, but it pays to check in advance) you should always guess, having first narrowed the odds as far as you can. An unanswered question gets you no marks; a guess can give you a one chance in four or so.

151. If you really do not know the answer and cannot work it out easily, always try to narrow the odds as much as possible before guessing. Eliminating one choice of the four offered means that even a blind guess will improve your odds from 25% to 33%!

152. When really stuck, sometimes the correct answer can be the long one surrounded by a few clauses. Exam setters sometimes do this to ensure that this must be the correct answer under the circumstances indicated. You cannot rely on this, but what the heck, you are *really* guessing by this time!

153. Never assume that the exam setter will have set equal number of answers “A”, “B”, “C” and so on. The questions usually come from books or computer data bases and the setter usually tries to cover the whole course taught, selecting questions that seem sensible and reasonable. In this process the answers are usually ignored. It is a waste going through putting four lots of “A” and four lots of “B” etc, hoping for a balance. I was once told by a student that if in total ignorance, “C”s tend to come up slightly more often and are a decent bet, because the original setter seems to like “C”s! This was her last ditch guess method. I checked this out of interest, and discovered that it was actually true about the total data base I was using! However, it did not work on the paper I had just set!!

154. Most people setting multiple choice exams try to cover the whole course. If there are twenty main sections or elements in the course, you are more likely to find one question on each, than many questions on the first six

sections and few on the last fourteen sections. An exact balance is rarely achieved but examiners usually try for that. This knowledge may help you if you are unfortunate enough to be forced to guess.

155. If you face a complex diagram with many lines that involves a starting equilibrium position then several changes (each with own line) it can look intimidating. But just circle the starting point, then determine the end result and circle it. It is then easier to compare start and finish, ignoring all the spurious lines.

156. If you have a modern multiple choice test, where you have to justify your choice of “d” or whatever in words, do try to get some theory into your answer. Never say something like “I chose ‘d’ because it is the right answer”. The marker already knows you will try to do this! Remember that theory and explanation beat description every time as a mark getter.

157. Such “justify” approaches usually leave a lot of space for you, even if they print perhaps only three lines to write on. That, the examiners hope, is all you will need and it makes their life easier. Do write below this if you wish (but not half a page in microscopic and barely legible handwriting, it will only annoy them). You can draw a diagram too if relevant to explain the theoretical point you are making. I recommend this for economics papers in particular.

158. True-false quizzes are like a simple form of multiple choice. All the advice on reading through, not getting hung up over one question rather than going on, and guessing if unsure applies.

### **Creative write-in answers**

155. These are more often met when applying for work rather than testing you in colleges and schools. Creative write-ins are designed to test your creative ability as much as anything. They are often of the type “What different purposes could you use a brick for?” You need to show both stability and creativity - you do not want them to think you are totally crazy, just creative. Naturally you write down common uses, like “build a wall”, “build a house”, and “stand a plank on two small piles and make a bookshelf”. Then you can get creative, in any way you can: “make stepping stones across a garden pond”, “build a miniature house at the far end of the garden in case passing gnomes need a place to sleep”, “throw it at the man practicing bagpipes across the road at two in the morning”, or “paint it silver and use it to reflect the sun and dazzle my enemies, if I should ever have any”. The more way-out the better, once you have put in the rather more normal uses of that brick.

### **Questions on pre-distributed materials**

159. Some schools and colleges hand out materials in advance and you will be tested on these. Naturally you have read them carefully before the exam. You should try to imagine what could be asked about them, write down a list of possible questions and prepare a skeleton outline answer for each.

160. You could also team up with one or more friends, try to invent questions and compare them, try to answer the questions and compare your answers. You can make a competitive game out of it, if you wish. If you then combine the several answers into one really good one, you will all do better in the real exam. Discussing and comparing helps not only to release new and better ideas for answers, it helps you to remember them too.

161. If you have time and enthusiasm, you could look up the same issues in another text book (often a very good idea in general, when learning a subject anyway) and also read other articles about the topics.

162. If you are allowed to take the actual material in with you, you could use highlighter to make the important bits jump out for you. Different colored highlighters could be used for Causes, Effects, Implications, Criticisms and the like, depending on the material and your guess as to the likely questions.

163. If you are not allowed to take in your own pre-distributed materials and instead they are handed out again in the exam room, you may find it helps to place them immediately in the same order as your own highlighted notes. This can help your memory and make it easier to find things quickly.

**MY FINAL BENEDICTION: GOOD LUCK IN THOSE EXAMS!**