

Make good use of pre-exam revision and briefing sessions

Dr Peter Levin

This note will be found most useful if it is read in conjunction with
Essays: Ten types of unfair question.

In UK universities it is quite usual for a taught course that will be tested by an 'unseen' examination to end with a revision session, possibly also incorporating a briefing of some kind. One purpose of these sessions is to give students an idea of what to expect in the exam – but without telling you what the questions on the actual exam paper will be, of course. They have the benefit that, being open to all students who have followed the course, everyone gets the same information and insights as everyone else, and if a student approaches a teacher asking for personal help, he or she can and should be referred to a session that is open to all.

You should find it helpful to tackle this issue in two stages: (1) Preparing for the session, and (2) Asking in the session for what you want.

Preparing for the session

Ask well in advance what plans for the session there are. If your exams are to be held in the summer term, your teachers may be presuming that early or midway through that term, after teaching has ended, is the right time. But you may think that it would be more helpful to hold the session at the end of the spring (Lent) term, so you have the Easter vacation to make use of what you have learned. In which case, get together with your fellow-students and ask for this.

Be aware of your rights. There should be a code of good practice for your degree programme, and it should say something like: 'Students must be given clear advance warning of any new or approved changes to examination format. When the content of a course changes to the extent that previous examination papers may not be a reliable guide to future papers, lecturers should warn students and should produce sample questions for the new parts of the course. When the course is new and, there are no previous papers, a full sample paper should be produced.' So ask if such a code exists, and what it says about the exams that you will be sitting.

Read past exam papers. How easy is it to understand what the questions were asking for? Identify any unfair questions, i.e. ones where the language doesn't make it clear what you are being asked for, and ones where you are being asked to do things - like 'Discuss' and 'Explain' - that you may not actually have been shown how to do. (See the list of ten types of unfair questions.) Talk about these with your fellow-students. Try to work out what the examiners were looking for. Rough out model answers, and make a note of the difficulties you encounter in doing this. (Collusion is fine here: it's called 'teamwork'!) Identify questions that confuse you, so you can bring these with you to the session.

Make a note of new books, articles etc that have been published within the past the year. Examiners can't repeat last year's questions, so they are always on the look-out for new material. Read the rubric of each exam paper with great care. It may say something like: 'Candidates should avoid overlap in their answers', 'Do not use substantially the same material in more than one question', 'Do not use substantially the same material in the two answers', 'Marks will be deducted that substantially repeat (*sic*) the content of the assessed essays for this course', 'Credit will be given for use of specific examples drawn from research carried out in the field of social policy', or 'Candidates are expected to demonstrate knowledge of a range of theoretical approaches and ethnographic materials'. Make a note of anything in the rubric that you don't quite understand, and confer with your fellow-students about it, and be prepared to ask about it in the session.

Asking in the session for what you want

In a nutshell, you and your fellow-students want three things, and you must be prepared to ask for them.

First, you want – and are entitled to – an assurance that either the exam paper will have the same format as last year's or, if it won't, you will be provided with a model. The same applies, as you would expect, if the course is a new one.

Second, if there is anything in the rubric for the most recent exam paper that you have difficulty in understanding, or that you think needs to have its implications spelled out, you want to have it made clear to you.

Third, and crucially, you want – and should be entitled to – demonstrations of how to tackle 'unfair' questions. Bring a list of the questions in recent exam papers that you find confusing. If you can, say why it is that you find them confusing – for example, where a question could be answered in more than one way. Having discussed these beforehand with your fellow-students, you should have confidence that you aren't exposing yourself to ridicule.

Bear in mind the nature of this exercise. You aren't just looking for hints and tips for answering questions, and you aren't trying to trap your teacher into giving away secrets about what will be in the exam paper. What you're trying to do is to become imbued with the examiners' mindsets, to absorb their values, to learn what it is that they appreciate in what they read, and to share their sense of what makes a high-scoring answer. In a way you're playing an intellectual game, but it's a game with a difference: everyone – including you – can be a winner!

[For more on preparing for exams, see *Sail Through Exams!*, ISBN 0335215769]