

Open Book Exams

Open book exams allow you to take notes, texts or resource materials into an exam situation. They test your ability to find and apply information and knowledge, so are often used in subjects requiring direct reference to written materials, like law statutes, statistics or acts of parliament.

Preparing for the exam

You need to study for open book exams just as you would for any exam. If you know your subject, you'll have a knowledge base to draw on. You will also understand how and why topics are linked. If you don't study you won't know how to find answers and even with the book in front of you, you won't be able to answer the questions.

Familiarise yourself with texts and notes, and make sure you can locate important information. Be familiar with your materials so you will not waste valuable exam time searching through them.

Exam requirements

The materials you can take into an Open Book exam can vary. Some restrict the type of materials (e.g. formula sheets and tables or a limited number of texts), others may be totally unrestricted (any quantity of any material). Check with your lecturer what you are allowed to take into the exam.

Materials might be:

- your notes
- readings, reference materials or textbooks
- equipment like calculators, drafting tools etc.

Preparing your materials

A large amount of materials might make you feel secure, but you'll probably work best relying on no more than a few pages of notes and a few well-chosen texts.

Spend some time making your reference materials as user-friendly as possible so that you don't waste time frantically flipping pages back and forth or shuffling papers. Try to have the essential facts, formulae, ideas etc. at your fingertips for fast reference. You can use the tables of contents and index pages in books to locate relevant sections in the books you plan to use. Also, you can bookmark useful chapters or pages, post-it-notes can be helpful here.

If you are allowed to take in notes, make some useful notes for yourself

- Summarise important information.
- Use clear headings.
- Organise notes by topic.
- Identify how topics are connected.
- write a flow chart to show how the relevant topics are connected.

How are open book exams different?

Open book exams test for more than just rote-learning. At university, simply memorising and repeating information is not enough to get you a good mark. Higher education is supposed to equip you with intellectual abilities and skills. Open Book exams test your ability to quickly find relevant information and then to understand, analyse, apply knowledge and think critically.

Types of questions

Open Book Exams don't test your memory. They test your ability to find and use information for problem solving, and to deliver well-structured and well-presented arguments and solutions.

Open Book exam questions usually require you to apply knowledge, and they may be essay-style questions or involve problem solving or delivering solutions. The style of question depends on the faculty or school setting the exam. For example in Law, the questions may set up a hypothetical fact situation that you will need to discuss.

Myths about open book exams

Open Book exams are easy

Open Book exams are not an easy option. Answering the questions well requires more than just copying information straight from texts. For example, having access to a textbook can stop you from giving a wrong answer if you can't remember a fact or formula, but just getting that fact correct won't get you good marks. In Open Book exams, it's how you locate, apply and use the information that is important.

You don't need to study

Probably the biggest misconception about Open Book exams is that there is no need to study anything. However, you should study just as you would for any other exam. Having books and notes to refer to might mean you don't have to memorise as much information, but you still need to be able to apply it effectively.

This means you must fully understand and be familiar with the content and materials of your course so you can find and use the appropriate information. In Open Book exams, you need to quickly find the relevant information in the resources you have. If you don't study you won't be able to because you won't know where it is.

You can just copy straight from the book!

You can't copy chunks of text directly from textbooks because this is plagiarism. In Open Book exams, the resource materials are made available to you, so you are expected to do more than just reproduce them. You must be able to find, interpret and apply the information in your sources to the exam questions. You usually need to reference as well, just as you would for any other assignment.

The more materials the better!

Don't get carried away and overload with materials and resources in the exam. Only take what you need. Too many materials can end up distracting you and crowding up your work space. Carefully select your materials and organise them for quick reference.

During the exam

Read the exam paper thoroughly.

Before you start the exam, make sure you read all the questions carefully and understand what it is you are being asked to do. Look for the “Instruction Words” in the questions (see study guide “Analysing the question”). If the question is ambiguous, unclear or too broad, ask for clarification from the examiner in the reading time before you attempt to answer.

Answer the 'easy' questions first.

You don't have to answer questions in the order in which they appear in the exam paper. Start with the easiest one first and do the hardest last. This helps to reduce anxiety and helps you think more clearly. Starting with the 'hard' questions (questions you are unsure of) slows you down and can leave you with insufficient time to address the others that you can do well in.

Don't over quote

Don't copy long chunks from the text or waste time quoting extensively. It is your own analysis that is most important. Use the time and information to build a well-constructed answer.

Don't over-answer

With lots of materials available, it can be tempting to over-write and waffle on. Remember that more is not always better. Answer the question, and aim for concise, accurate, thoughtful answers that make good use of supporting evidence.

Good luck!