

'Let's get on with it'

Mostly summarised from "Studying for a Degree..." by P Dunleavy, 1986.

Once examinations are on the horizon many students revert to old school habits and set out to memorize as much as possible without thinking how this will help them to write the essay questions or solve the problems asked in the exam.

Remember, exams test mainly whether you've practised doing exams. So,

01 Avoid indiscriminate rote learning

INSTEAD

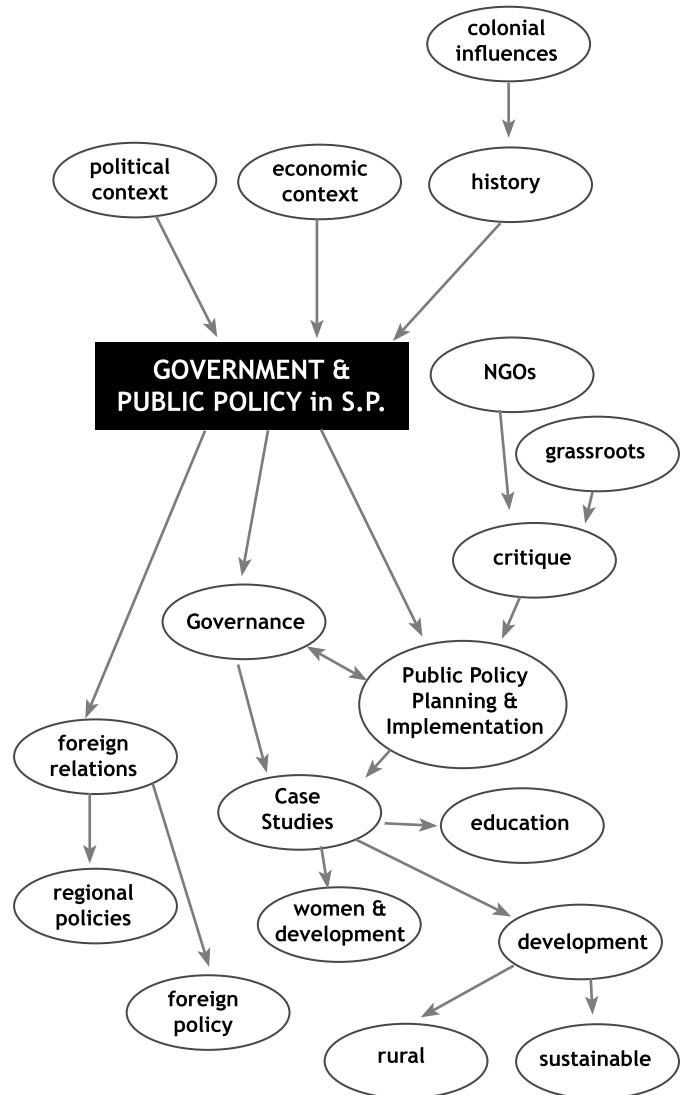
your aim should be to understand all the main concepts of the course you have just taken and the relationships between them, so that you can use them well.

02 Identify the main topics of your course

You can do this in a variety of ways, e.g.

- check through the course outline carefully
- listen to any cues or revision hints the lecturers give you
- quickly review all your notes, highlight the important points
- compare with other students
- review past examination papers to identify key concepts and topics which frequently recur

One way of exploring the relationships between course topics is to make a *mind map*. The example below is based on the course outline of *HP 101 Government and Public Policy in the South Pacific*. Every person's mind map will be unique, as we each interact with the information in our own way.



03 Select topics for revision

Use the past examination papers and any other information you get from the lecturers to decide HOW MANY and WHICH topics it is important to know, for example you may decide to revise twice as many topics as you are required to answer in the exam.

04 Make a revision timetable

Draw up a revision timetable which

- balances time between each course and the topics you have decided to concentrate on
- is realistic and allows time for eating, rest and sport, e.g. 8 hours work a day

Stick to it!

05 Learn and use the material selected

You will have to learn the material, of course, but more important you probably need practice in writing answers briefly and clearly. You also probably need practice in how to select key arguments and facts, and how to leave out the less important, more basic or irrelevant material. To achieve all these things you can work on past exam questions: practise understanding what the questions mean and adapting your knowledge to fit the questions.

06 The key activities of the revision period should be **WRITING** and **SORTING OUT YOUR OWN IDEAS**

You do not have to know everything about a topic before you begin responding to it, a practice answer will help you to identify what you do not already know. One way of tackling past exam questions is as follows:

- **ideas:** jot down as many different points as you can think of about the topic. Later you can assess them and put them in order.
- **analyse the question:** as you would an assignment question, and look carefully at this checklist to help you *rewrite the question* in your own words, often your version turns out to be much longer than the original.

checklist of ingredients in the question:

(Dunleavy, 1986)

1. Concepts

The question itself almost always contains some key terms, but are there any hidden ideas as well?

2. Debates

Most exam questions in the humanities and social sciences related to controversies, whether conflicts or bit theories, or empirical disagreements. If you cannot see two or more possible viewpoints, then look again.

3. Values and Style

Can be as important in differentiating viewpoints in arts subjects as explicit theoretical approaches in the social sciences. What are the key issues or themes which are involved in the subject?

4. Proofs

In more technical subjects there may be key diagrams, formulae or graphs which need careful presentation. What conditions do these proofs assume, and are there any problems, limitations or anomalies in their operation?

5. Evidence

What kind of empirical or applied information is relevant? Remember this could include examples, quotations, text analysis, statistics (not whole tables), case studies surveys, less systematic evidence like official reports, impressions.

6. Authors

Who are the big names in the field, associated with concepts, debates or evidence? Remember, you need key names only, not obscure authors on obvious points.

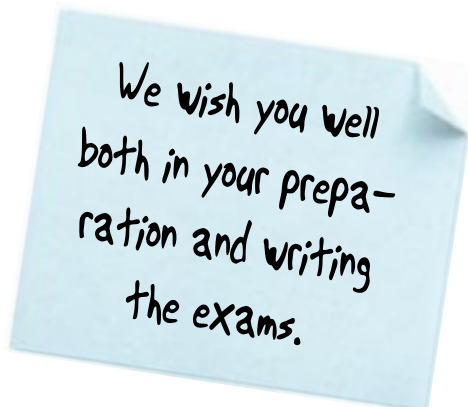
- **rewrite the question:** in your own words. Often your version turns out to be much longer than the original.
- **organize the answer:** Now you are comfortable with the question, go through your list of topic ideas and cross out any which seem irrelevant to this question. Divide up the remaining ideas into paragraphs, e.g. take a couple of sheets of paper and draw boxes on them, one for each paragraph, **write down a heading for each box, then put in your points.** Adjust them if necessary, perhaps one has too many/few points for instance next decide which is the most logical order for the paragraphs, and number them appropriately, putting the most important ideas first (time is short in exams) you should end up with a logical sequence of ideas within each paragraph as well as between paragraphs.
- **reassessment:** Take time to look at your plan critically and ask yourself.
 1. *could I write all that down under exam conditions?*
 2. *is there any repetition or irrelevant material to be deleted?*
 3. *has the question been answered?*
 4. *have any major points been omitted? Check through your texts, essays, notes, to see if anything else should be included. Add in any extra points.*
- **practise run:** Next, learn all the points which go to make up that answer. Then try to write them out as succinctly as possible in timed conditions.

07 Join or form a study group to prepare for the examinations

Many students at USP find it helpful to prepare for the exams in groups. This is very useful because you learn by explaining ideas to others, you share your knowledge

and it keeps you sane. The last point is important as it can be hard to keep going hour after hour on your own.

You could use the ideas of this sheet about identifying the main topics of the course writing and sorting out ideas to answer questions very well in a group.



Different students work in different ways.

Here are some examples of how successful students at the University of Lancaster approached their exams -

Alan: Chemistry

- I attend all revision lectures
- About 3 weeks before an exam I check I have full sets of lecture notes and scan read them over a few hours
- With an idea now of what has been taught I photocopy exam papers and analyse which subjects are commonly asked, then check this against that gained from the revision lectures
- I next spend 2 or 3 days in the library researching important areas
- Then I rewrite the relevant lecture notes in much greater detail
- About a week before the exam I start to learn these notes so that I can regurgitate them or apply what I have learned to a problem
- Finally I test my knowledge by answering questions from past papers
- Answering problems is simply a matter of practice. Doing worked examples from textbooks is useful for this and basically it is simply a matter of keeping at it until I have satisfied myself I could answer any variation of the problem
- I never work more than 6 hours a day and always stop if I feel tired. I never work the evening before an exam, but relax and get a good night's sleep.

BJN: English literature with European Studies

- Good results in literature depend on blending a thorough reading of course material with brief incisive essay-writing.
- Essays produced during the year and in the exam must exhibit an original approach, bringing to the fore your own reading of the text. Imagination is important in literary criticism, e.g. connecting together different aspects in the same or other works, backed up by argument.
- Read around a work to establish its historical and literary context and significant themes, eg short modern essays and introductory collections of papers. Connect everything you read to your own opinions on a text or writer.
- You should not go into an exam hoping to write a specific essay on a subject, but should adapt what you have prepared to suit the question.
- I used a mnemonic system for this. I worked out in advance which subjects/text/authors in each paper I would prefer to write about, where possible sticking to those on which I had already written essays during the year

BJN: English literature with European Studies (continued)

- I then divided up my material, a combination of what I had learned and my own interpretation, into distinctive themes or issues, eg quest motive, religious imagery etc and gave each a heading
- I memorised these headings and made anagrams of their first letters, eg BRIEF CHIEF or made-up words. Once the exam started I wrote down the anagrams immediately. The headings made structuring my answers simpler and allowed me to select those best suited to each question. get a good night's sleep.
- The exam itself is based on the skill with which one can write a miniature piece of literary criticism in under an hour. It must be short and to the point and answer the question. It is enough to concentrate on one or two ideas provided the argument is well supported by evidence. The essay should be well-structured. So try to have an idea from the start the essay of where it will arrive. Bring the threads of the argument together, and every point to its conclusion.

Marguerite: Sociology

- My exam strategy consisted of knowing a small amount about a wide range of topics. I tried to grasp concepts, ideas and arguments which could be used in a variety of ways.
- I studied past exam papers, and I wrote model answers to imaginary questions on the topics I had revised. I then checked back to see what I had forgotten.
- I made cards with key facts on, these I pinned up all round my house, and I 'wrote' exam answers in my head while I did the housework.
- I also attended all revision seminars and I got together with other students to study the topics. The fact that my major department put out topic lists for all the exams seemed enormously helpful
- In the exams themselves, before even looking at the question paper, I wrote down (at the back of the answer book) all the key concepts, authors, arguments and anything else I thought I might forget. This felt like an indispensable resource which I could draw on throughout the exam, and by the time I got to the final question of each paper and was tired, these notes helped trigger my memory.

Alyson: Marketing and Modern Languages (continued)

- I attended revision seminars which helped in the selection of topics, exam technique and approaches to revision.
- 2 or 3 weeks before the exams I tackled past questions in bullet point form. I underlined key words such as 'compare and contrast' or 'critically analyse' to concentrate on the question. Then I checked my notes to see if my answer was accurate. Studying past papers helped me to learn how to apply my knowledge to produce an answer which proved I understood the subject
- When confused by past paper questions I met other people on my course to discuss the subject, which was extremely beneficial
- Before the actual exams I tried to relax: go for a swim or drink coffee with friends
- During the exam I kept my head down, wrote brief plans for every question and remembered to allow myself the correct time for each question.

Adapted from :How to get a first class degree" ed H Arksey, 1992.

Alyson: Marketing and Modern Languages

- Using last 4 years exam papers I made lists of all the questions which seemed to come up year after year
- I selected a number of topics: those which I liked and understood, or which I had already written a course-work essay on, depending on the number of questions to be answered in the exam, eg for the Marketing Management exam I revised six topics to answer four questions
- I set myself a target for each day, eg to make notes and learn one topic in detail
- I summarised my notes on a topic into bullet points and read them through. Then I tested myself by trying to write them out. Any I missed I would add in later in red pen. The next time I revised that topic I first wrote down everything I could think of to see how much I had remembered.
- I stopped for a 15 minute break every 1 1/2-2 hours
- To revise for French and Italian languages I learnt 15 minutes of vocabulary a day, completed every past language paper I could find, and read over all my coursework essays, translations and comprehension papers to note my mistakes. For the essay paper I read numerous French periodicals to compile information about current affairs.