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# Doing Exams

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**By:** Sieglinde McGee

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## Doing Exams

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### Aims

This chapter focuses on how to approach exams, whether they be multiple choice questions (MCQ) or essay papers. In addition to showing you how to narrow your focus, break down questions and other positive strategies, it also shows you some of the things that you should not do in an exam. By the end of this chapter you should know:

- how to prepare for and take MCQ tests and written exams
- the importance of making an effort in *every* year of your degree
- how to answer the question that you thought you couldn't
- how to reduce exam stress
- how to break down what the exam question is asking you to do
- why it is important to read back through your answers before submitting them
- some things that you should consider doing if you are a student with a disability.

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### What is Expected at University?

You will have been used to doing summer exams and also Christmas tests in school or on any courses that you have done since then. In most cases it has been only your summer exams, in combination with continuous assessment work, that provide your yearly grade. This is usually because you study a subject over the course of the whole academic year; your English or mathematics class, for example, started in September and continued through to the end of the school year. University is different.

Many British and Irish universities are now semesterised, which means that the year is effectively split up into two distinct sections. If your university is operating this system then it is likely that the courses you take in the first term will finish in December and that exams will follow either immediately or a few weeks later. Then you will start new courses in the spring and take the exams for those in the summer. In other universities you may finish courses in December but not take the exam in those subjects until the summer exams period. You may also have to take class tests or do coursework in some subjects and it is usual that those mini-exams and assignments will contribute towards your overall grade. Clearly it is very important that you make yourself aware of your course requirements as soon as possible, preferably no later than the second week of the term.

There are two different types of exams that are commonly used in psychology: multiple choice questions (MCQ) and essay questions. They use different skills and, despite the popularity of the former style, it is arguable that only the essay-style exams are truly appropriate for undergraduate psychology. One of the aims of the degree is to develop your ability to evaluate material critically but MCQ tests are not about thought

or evaluation; they are purely memory tests and it is possible to get a first on an MCQ test without really understanding the material that you have memorised. A student who has an excellent memory but poor critical thinking skills could get 100 per cent on an MCQ exam but no more than a 2:2 had that same test been given as an essay exam. Similarly a student who has excellent critical evaluation skills and comprehensive knowledge of a topic might get a first in an essay exam but do poorly on an MCQ test that required the memorisation of facts and figures. I remember one MCQ exam that was so full of such details that my classmates joked that the questions were like asking a student to recall 'on the picture on the upper right-hand corner of page 45 of your textbook, was the person wearing (a) a red shirt, (b) a blue shirt, (c) a green shirt, (d) a jumper?

Essay papers, which are the more usual approach, are a different story. If you do not understand the material, adopt a critical stance in your answer, and produce a well-structured essay then you are unlikely to do well. You will be expected to produce an exam answer that is as well-structured, well-written, and well-argued as would be an essay that you submitted as coursework (see [Chapter 4](#)). Obviously you will not have as many citations in your exam answer as you would in a course essay and you will not be producing a references section in the exam, but you will still have to write a good academic essay.

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## Preparing for and Doing MCQ Exams

Multiple choice exams will not be a familiar experience to most students as, throughout school and any other courses that they may have taken, they would usually have had to write essay answers. Sometimes you may have had to label diagrams or provide short answers to a long series of questions but MCQ would usually have formed no more than a part of an exam paper. Unlike essay questions, MCQ are a memory test and so they do not examine your understanding of the topic, just what facts, figures and pieces of information you can recall. I have always thought of MCQ as being an inappropriate form of examination in university psychology as it is all about memorisation and regurgitation instead of requiring an application of the analytical skills that you must develop in order to do well in your degree. Unfortunately some lecturers see this style of exam as being an ideal time-saving approach for them, particularly if there is a large number of students in the class.

MCQ exams will usually consist of at least 100 items consisting of a statement or question followed by four potential answers, sometimes five. You must choose the one of these options that best answers the question. There are different types of MCQ exams in that some will be well-written by the lecturer who taught the course, some will have a problematic design, while others will consist of questions taken at random from a question bank which, in my experience, sometimes does not work well, from the students' point of view. One reason why MCQ exams from the latter group can be more difficult than those that have been written by the lecturer is that questions from the bank may come from chapters and topics that were not covered on your course. Lectures will have focused on an understanding of the material and on how to think critically and if it is a subject that students find interesting then reading will most likely have been broad and evaluative rather than focusing on facts and figures that are not really all that important.

The following are examples of sample questions from an MCQ paper on abnormal psychology. The first one represents a better style of question than the second one. Why? The questions and options should be clear and easy to read and while it may seem easy to the examiner, s/he should remember that there may be students taking their exam paper who are dyslexic, have visual difficulties, or require the assistance of a reader in the exam. If the question is long and/or the options are wordy or all very similar to each other then this will present an additional level of difficulty to some students. I know some students with reading or visual difficulties who prefer MCQ exams to essay papers, but many others with similar difficulties have expressed their dismay at having to spend most of the exam reading instead of writing, saying that they felt that their grade suffered as a result of the combination of their disability and the design of the exam.

### Sample Question 1

High blood pressure in the absence of an evident physical cause is called:

- (a) fictitious disorder
- (b) psychosomatic
- (c) elevated hypertension
- (d) essential hypertension.

### Sample Question 2

In epidemiological studies the term 'incidence' refers to:

- (a) the overall frequency of a disorder in a specified population
- (b) the number of new cases of a disorder reported during a specified time
- (c) the total number of cases of a disorder reported in a specified population
- (d) the known plus unreported number of cases of a disorder reported during a specified time.

The answers to these questions are 1d and 2b. Most items on the paper will be of the type in question 1, a statement followed by four short options. There may be a few of the second type of question on the paper but hopefully no more than a handful as these are the ones that can provide problems for students with learning or visual difficulties; each of the options contain several of the same words but in different orders.

Think about this for a moment. How do you think that you might have to prepare for a MCQ exam given the often specific nature of the information that they require you to have

remembered? How might your strategy be different to how you would prepare for an essay exam?

Preparing for a MCQ exam will require a different strategy than you would use in studying for an essay paper. For the latter you would have to do a lot of reading, studying the course textbook and additional sources, trying to understand both the important details and the broader issues of the topic. For a MCQ exam you will work only from your course textbook and lecture notes as the questions on the exam will almost always be taken directly from their content. This means no additional reading and no need to worry about understanding the material in order to do well in the exam; just memorise to regurgitate.

You do not have to learn the whole book by rote but you will have to memorise facts and figures from each chapter that is covered on your course. How will you know what to look for? There are different types of questions that will be asked on an MCQ exam and these are as follows.

## Definitions

These questions will either ask you to identify the term being described or they might give you the term and ask you to choose which of the options provided best defines it. The first sample question above is an example of this. To prepare for these types of questions you should pay particular attention to the glossary in your textbook. This might be at the end of the book or it may be in the form of key terms highlighted throughout the chapter or collated at the end of the chapter. Your first step should be to learn this terminology and what it means. Then go back through the chapters to identify any other terms that strike you as something that could appear on the exam. Jot them down with their definition and add them to the glossary.

## Acronyms

An acronym is an abbreviation made up of the first letter of each of the words for which it stands, for example IQ for intelligence quotient. In these questions you will be given the acronym and be asked to identify which of the options is the correct one. Occasionally you will find a somewhat silly answer among the options, which may be there to make you smile or because the lecturer just couldn't think of another plausible-sounding option. An example of this type of question is this:

REM is the abbreviation for

- (a) rapid early movement
- (b) right eye movement
- (c) rapid eye movement
- (d) really easy money.

The answer to this question is option (c). Every time you come across an acronym in your textbook you should

make a note of it and, of course, what the letters stand for.

## Criteria or Stages

This is another very popular type of question on MCQ papers. You will find that many things in psychology have different parts, stages, or diagnostic criteria and you should make sure that you learn these. There are two different ways in which these questions can be asked: by identifying components in the correct order or identifying which one is missing or incorrect.

Diagnostic criteria may not be in any particular order. However, theoretical models or stage theories – for example, Freud's psychosexual stages of development or Maslow's hierarchy of needs – have parts that must be placed in a specific order. For these it is not enough to remember the names of the different steps but you must be able to list them in sequence. If you are familiar with the different steps, stages, and criteria for the conditions, theories, models, and so on that you come across, then you will also be able to spot the answer in the questions that include some of the correct points with one incorrect one included. Examples of these types of MCQ are as follows (the correct answers are d and c respectively):

The three stages of Seyle's General Adaptation Syndrome are:

- (a) awareness, resistance, exhaustion
- (b) alarm, reaction, exhaustion
- (c) awareness, reaction, extinction
- (d) alarm, resistance, exhaustion.

Which of the following is *not* a symptom of an asthmatic attack?

- (a) wheezing
- (b) tightness in the chest
- (c) sense of impending doom
- (d) difficulty breathing.

## People and Paradigms

Two important pieces of information that you should learn with each theory, model, or approach that you study are the person associated with it and the paradigm under which it falls. With what are the famous people in psychology associated? These are some of the easiest questions on an MCQ exam and yet they are ones that too many students get wrong. An example of this type of question is:

Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung are associated with the:

- (a) cognitive paradigm
- (b) biological paradigm

- (c) behavioural paradigm
- (d) psychoanalytic paradigm.

The correct answer here is option (d). To prepare for this type of question you should ensure that you always associate famous theorists with the overall broad approach under which they fall (the paradigms) and also that you are familiar with each of the major paradigms in psychology and what it is exactly that they are about.

## Fill in the Blanks

These questions are presented as a statement that contains one or more missing words. You have to choose the correct option to complete the sentence. An example of this type of question is:

Depth perception in babies can be tested using the —— experiment.

- (a) virtual reality
- (b) binocular parallax
- (c) virtual cliff
- (d) temporal context.

The answer is (c). These questions can be on any aspect from your course and the missing term can be anything, perhaps a person's name or the name of a model, theory test, or disorder. The best way to prepare for these is to make a note of key pieces of information that you think might be a potential multiple choice question.

## Scenarios

Sometimes the question might be presented as a mini case study with a question at the end; this would most likely be seen on an abnormal psychology paper. You need to know the diagnostic criteria for the different types of disorder covered in order to be able to answer this type of question. The following is an example of this type of question (the answer is option b):

Yutake is a bright 17-yearold whose parents hoped he would attend university. Over the past year he has become increasingly socially withdrawn. He eventually stopped attending school or communicating with friends and he has not left his bedroom for several months. Like an estimated 1.2 million young Japanese, Yutake may be going through:

- (a) schizophrenia
- (b) hikikomori
- (c) pibloktoq
- (d) koro.

## Facts and Figures

Questions that require you to have memorised details such as prevalence rates, proportions, age ranges, or other numeric values appear quite frequently on MCQ papers. The information may have appeared on a graph, table, chart, or other figure in a book, something that you may have glossed over if you were studying to understand and evaluate the material. An example of this type of question is as follows:

The prevalence rate of specific phobias in men is about:

- (a) 7%
- (b) 9%
- (c) 11%
- (d) 13%.

The correct answer is option (a) and the best way to prepare for these questions is to make a note of everything in your textbook that quotes a prevalence rate, proportion, or age range and then study that list.

Past papers are a great way to practise for your MCQ exam but often you will find that there are none available; your university may not publish multi-choice exam papers. Find someone in the year ahead of you who may have taken the exam last year and still have a copy of the exam paper. These days many textbooks come with CD-ROMs and they may include sample questions. You will also be able to find sample quizzes online and while it is a good idea to practise on these they may not cover exactly the same content as your textbook and you should remember that your exam will be based on the book that was recommended by your lecturer and also the lectures that you attended.

Many MCQ exams will apply negative marking, which is designed as a deterrent to stop you from just guessing the answers. The usual format for this is that you will gain one mark for every correct answer but lose one-third of a mark for every incorrect answer. Unanswered questions are usually awarded zero. Although the idea is to reduce guessing I have found, both from personal experience and from talking to students, that the presence of negative marking increases perceived stress levels in exams and can lead to second-guessing on answers that you know are right but feel must be wrong because they are 'too obvious'. Some students have reported that they only answered the questions of which they were sure and left out everything else for fear of losing marks. That is a bad strategy and I know that several of them failed because they either did not answer enough questions to pass or because they only answered 40–50 questions out of 100 and got some of them wrong.

So how should you go about doing an MCQ exam? The first thing is to stay calm, as you should do in every exam. There is usually more time available in MCQ exams than you will need if you know the answers to most or all of the questions after the first couple of readings. You will usually be expected to complete the answer sheet by pencil so it is important that you bring at least two pencils with you, HB rather than H, as well as a good eraser and a sharpener. Make sure that you read the instructions on the front cover of the booklet

as there may be important information there of which you were not aware. You will also have to complete the information section on your answer sheet(s) and this is usually at the top of the page. The information required may include your name but it will definitely require either your student number or your exam number. Read the instructions very carefully; if you put the wrong number on the page then you may find that no grade will be returned to you.

Filling out an MCQ answer sheet is rather like completing your lottery slip; you must shade in the box that represents your answer. If you only put a light mark or a tick or partially complete the box then the machine that is usually used to compute your score may not be able to read your answer and so you will not get any credit for it. If you want to change an answer then rub out the one you marked, thoroughly and fill in the box that indicates your final answer. You must not use a pen to complete the sheet because if you do and then change your mind on an answer you won't be able to change it on the sheet. That is because the machine will read the two boxes you have shaded in and mark you as being incorrect; at least one of the answers you have marked in this scenario will be wrong.

Remember that you have plenty of time to complete the MCQ exam and make sure that you read through the questions and options carefully; if you read them too quickly then you might misread them. If you are sure of the answer then fill it in on the answer sheet. If you are unsure then skip that question and move on. Once you have gone through all the questions go back to the start of the booklet and spend more time on the ones you left out the first time around. If you think that you do not know the answer to a question, or if you are not sure of the correct response, then go through each of the options carefully to see if you can eliminate any of them. It's like going 50:50 on *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire* though, sadly, you cannot phone a friend or ask the audience. Which options are definitely *not* the correct answer to the question? You may find that by doing this you are left with just one remaining option, which is probably the correct one. Sometimes you will even find the answer to one question is contained within another question in the same exam booklet. You may also find that something that appears in one question or its options might jog your memory and enable you to answer correctly a question you thought you could not do.

I have seen some students mark all their answers on the question booklet and then transfer those answers onto the answer sheet but this is not a good idea. Some of those students have run out of time or discovered that they accidentally skipped a question during the transfer process, leading them to fill in the wrong answer on every subsequent question. Oops! Your question booklet may be collected at the end of the exam but it will not be used in the grading process; only your answer sheet will be graded. On several occasions I have chosen to grade MCQ exams by hand rather than using the OCR and computer software. What I discovered during that process was that many students were not completing their answer sheet correctly and, in at least a couple of cases, students would have failed had their sheet been entrusted to the computer! Apart from the strikingly high proportion of students who seemed unable to follow the instructions on how to enter their student number at the top of the sheet, many had used ticks, dots, circling of boxes, or the partial completion of boxes, or had used either pen or a very light pencil to complete their answer sheet. Those students were lucky that their lecturer had chosen to mark their exam by hand and they would not realise that they would

have got often considerably lower marks if their answer sheet had been processed automatically. You should always presume that your answer sheet will be graded by a computer and so you should ensure that you complete it properly.

The following are examples of how to complete the student number section on your answer sheet, and how not to do it; these are a typical layout. In these examples the student's number is 09135248. The last box shows how to mark the answer that you have selected to a question, in this case option (b).

Student number	Student number	Student number	Student number	
				1 [A]  [C] [D]
correct	wrong	wrong	wrong	correct

Once you have decided that you cannot answer any more questions on the paper, go back through the booklet and answer sheet to make sure that you are happy with your answers and that you have filled in the boxes properly.

## Preparing for Essay Papers

Many students have asked me when and how they should start studying for their exams. When is too early and when is too late? Are there any particular things that they should do or avoid? Are there any short-cuts? It is never too early to start preparing for exams but how late you can leave it will be a combination of your particular learning and work styles (see [Chapter 2](#)), the amount of material that you need to cover, the number of exam papers that you have to take, and what it is that you hope to gain from the exams.

Not every student is motivated to strive for first class honours; many are quite happy to maintain a 2:1 average. That is fine. You may have any number of other things going on in your life, particularly if you are a mature student and/or if you have to work to be able to pay for your fees and accommodation, and aiming for a 2:1 degree is enabling you to get a good degree that will allow you to compete for the jobs or postgraduate places that you seek. However, a disappointing attitude that I have often seen in first and second year students is that they will be happy just to pass the year. Why should they bother working when these two years don't count towards their degree mark? They'll work in third (and fourth) year as that's the grade that will go on their degree cert.

Think about this for a moment. Why might it be a bad idea to aim or settle for only a pass

or a 2:2 in the first two years of your degree? Might this have implications for your career choice? Might this affect your overall degree grade even though the marks from first and second year do not count?

There are several reasons why not making the effort to do well in first and/or second year exams and continuous assessment is not a good idea and some of them are discussed below.

## Transcripts

The first thing that you should realise is that the universities to whom you are applying for a postgraduate place, or even some employers in related areas, will not request only your degree grade but a transcript of all of your results from each year of your degree course. If you slacked off in your first two years and got low marks but then started working in third year and achieved a 2:1, this will be apparent to the people who request your transcript. That 38 per cent on a first year paper or 45 per cent year average that disappointed or even amused you will look bad to the university or company deciding whether or not to take you on. You may be passed over in favour of the consistent achiever or steady improver or you may lose out on a financial grant (studentship) that would have funded you for your postgraduate research. Don't panic! Many of us will have one or two poor marks on our transcripts but these will be 'forgiven' if your overall performance is consistent or shows steady improvement from good grades to even better grades.

## Skills

The first two years of your degree course are not doss years or easy years. They are designed to give you the opportunity to develop the key skills that will enable you to do well in your degree and that will ensure that you are then ready to move on to higher study or further training. If you spend either or both of these two years partying, missing classes, doing the bare minimum, and achieving poor or low grades then you are jeopardising your chances of doing well in third (and fourth) year. Also, many of the courses that you will take in your final year(s) will presume that you know the related material that was covered in your first two years. You need to study and make an effort in every year of your course.

## Continuing in Psychology

Most psychology degrees are direct entry, which means that once you get your place on the course you are allowed to continue into second and third (and fourth) year so long as you pass your continuous assessments, your exams, and any other requirements that the department may have. However, you may be studying psychology through a general arts route that allows only a specific number of students to progress from first year into second year psychology. Competition for those places is tough and I have heard of students who achieved first class honours in freshman psychology but still missed out in the race for places in the second year; too many other students in their class scored more highly. If you are taking psychology in first year arts

and hope to continue on towards a psychology degree, then you must work very hard and do extremely well in your assignments and exams. Otherwise your only options will be to continue your degree in the other freshman arts subjects you were taking or to try to apply for a transfer to another university in the hope that they may have a place for you in second year psychology.

## Low Expectations

If your lecturers and tutors see that you are not making an effort then their expectations of you may be lowered. You might think, so what? However, these are the people upon whom you will be relying for academic references and those forms often require the lecturer to rank you among all the students that they have ever taught. If you show an attitude of not caring or of not trying then you may find that you are ranked 'below 50 per cent' on reference forms and a tick on that box will see your application drop to the bottom of the pile. If it is a reference for a job rather than a postgraduate place then you cannot expect the lecturer to say that you are hardworking, motivated, and a self-starter if you just didn't bother in the early years of your degree. You may have worked really hard in the year(s) that made up your final grade but first impressions have a tendency to stick.

Okay, you might decide that you just won't be going on to postgraduate studies in psychology so you won't be looking for an academic referee. However, you will have to do an independent research project (called a final year project, dissertation, or undergraduate thesis) in your final year and for that you will need an academic supervisor. If you have created the impression of being a slacker or someone who appears to have little interest in psychology, then you may find it hard to enlist the supervisor that you want or who is willing to supervise the type of project that you want to do.

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## Past Papers

How do you prepare for essay exams? The first step I always recommend is to get a copy of as many past papers as you can, even if they were set by different lecturers. There may have been different topics covered or emphases stressed in the courses given by other lecturers, but the style of question asked will be very similar if not the same. Identify the topics that appear on each paper and match them up with questions on the same topics from other exam papers. For example, you see that the topic of operant conditioning came up on the summer exam on Introduction to Psychology in each of the past three years. Make a note of the year and the question:

2009 Explain what is meant by operant conditioning and give examples of how it is applied in education and childcare.

2008 What is the difference between classical conditioning and operant conditioning?

2007 Discuss the concept of operant conditioning and show how it can be applied in a modern

setting.

If you do this for every topic on every exam paper for the courses you are taking then you will have built up a question bank. You will be able to use these questions to guide your reading, to give you an idea of the angles that may be required for discussion, and to help you keep your focus on the specific issues that are covered on your course rather than getting lost in a wider range of reading for fun and interest. Spending many hours in libraries reading widely about psychology can be fun and it's possible to find the most interesting books by browsing through the stacks. However, a common mistake that first year students make is to read broadly without having also concentrated on the specifics of their courses. Realising that you should have focused more on exactly what was covered in lectures rather than what you found interesting is a little late if it happens as you are sitting in the exam hall reading through the paper.

A good time to get a copy of the past exam papers and to group questions by topics is in weeks one and two of the term or semester, when you will know which courses you will be taking throughout the year. Many universities will have online copies of past exam papers, which you can download and save, whereas others will have printed copies available in their libraries for photocopying. Past papers are a wonderful study aid.

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## Memorised Essays and Question Spotting

We saw in [Chapter 4](#) that one of the common reason why students fail in exams is because they did not answer the question that was posed; remember to ATFQ! Perhaps you knew lots about the broad topic and just wrote about that, never really dealing with the specific angle that was required. Maybe you spotted a term or concept in the title and presumed that it was the central focus point of the question. Or maybe you did not read the question carefully enough to realise that it actually contained two or even three distinct parts, each of which you were expected to discuss. Some students like to prepare essays in advance, memorise them, and then use these in an exam, but this is a practice that I would advise strongly against doing.

Think about this for a moment. Why might it be a bad idea to memorise an essay and then try to regurgitate it or modify it in the exam?

Think of something that you have memorised by rote in the past and that you can still recite well, maybe a poem, song lyrics, a prose piece, maybe even a prayer. Now start reciting it from the 14th line, right now and without thinking about it for more than a second or two. You can't, can you? You cannot do it without going back to the start, scrolling through the piece in your mind until you get to the start of the 14th line. Then you can do it. Now imagine that you are sitting in an exam hall with just three hours in which to write three critical essays of around 1000–1500 words in length, each. You spot 'your' three topics, the ones for which you prepared and memorised essays, but the angle being asked for is not the angle you have prepared. What do you do? You cannot write out the essay you memorised and expect to get a good grade because

your essay would not be the required assignment. Instead you need to try to restructure the essay that is only in your head so that it answers the set question. But the section that you need is in the middle to end of the memorised essay. You may have thought that you would be able to make any necessary changes to your memorised essay in the exam but, as you will learn in your cognition classes, stress impedes the cognitive processes (i.e. memory, thinking, perception). Now you find yourself desperately reciting your essay in your mind, trying to get to the part that fits the exam question because you find that you cannot just jump in somewhere in the middle and keep going. Time is passing and if your exam answer just launches into that part of your memorised essay then its structure will be poor, which could lead to a lower grade. Your answer is also likely to be too short because you are only using a part of your prepared essay and not the full thing; short answers are a leading cause of poor grades at university. Please, for your own sake, do not memorise essays that you plan to regurgitate or modify in the exams.

'Your' three topics; now that's another story. With rare exceptions, which are usually cases of lecturers who don't really bother changing their exam paper from year to year, you cannot predict what questions will or will not come up. There are no patterns or systems. Lecturers do not consult past papers and think 'Hmmm, which question will I give them this year? Well I asked them A in 2007 and B in 2008 and 2009, so it's time for A again this year'. If you look for patterns in exam papers you will find them but these are a coincidence and you cannot afford to play Russian roulette with your exams. We have all done this at some time or another and sometimes we will gotten have away with it but it can go so badly wrong. Make sure that you prepare thoroughly at least twice the number of topics as there are questions on the paper that you must answer. So if you have to answer three questions then you need to prepare a minimum of six topics.

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## The 'What if I Knew Everything' Game

You are sitting in the exam, you have to answer three questions, and of the four topics that you have prepared thoroughly only two have come up. What do you do? What you certainly do not do is to hand in fewer answers than were required and leave the exam early. If you have to answer three questions and you do only two, then you have thrown away 33.33 per cent of your exam. If you averaged 60 per cent on the two that did answer then you may get away with it; your mark would be 40 per cent. You would pass but that would drag down your overall average for the year, and this could be your degree year. But if you only averaged 58 per cent then you will be returned a grade of 38 per cent. If it was a two-question paper and you only answered one then you have almost certainly failed. This means a poor overall average for your year, having to do a repeat exam or failing the year, depending on the subject and the department's rules. One way or the other it will be an embarrassing blip on your academic transcript, which will be seen by other universities to which you may apply for postgraduate research or training or by any employers who may also want your transcripts.

In my experience almost all students who do not answer the required number of questions in an exam will end up failing the paper. In many of these cases the scripts look as though the writer did not study enough or did not know how to write an exam essay in psychology. Sometimes you can find yourself in a situation of

coming up one answer short because of stress, even though you have studied hard and you know that you know the answer. But whatever the reason that you find yourself in a situation where you feel that you cannot do the required number of questions, there is a game that you should play. It can be very effective at jogging the memory and it can also be the difference between failing or barely passing an exam or getting low to high honours on the paper. We will be looking at how to break down essay titles shortly so I will be brief here. The game is the 'what if I knew everything' game and here is how it works:

### Box 6.1: The 'What if I Knew Everything' Game

Step 1: Read the remaining exam questions carefully and decide which one you feel is least threatening/scary/panic-inducing/incomprehensible.

Step 2: Break down the title (see below).

Step 3: Open a page or answer book for rough work and remembering what we talked about in [Chapter 4](#) break up the page into the headings introduction, main point 1, main point 2, main point 3, and conclusion.

Step 4: Ask yourself 'If I knew everything about this topic what sort of things would I have to mention in the introduction?' and then jot down bullet points under your heading Introduction. This might look as follows:

*Introduction*

- general statement about the topic
- identify key issue
- define key concept
- state my position
- state how I will show my position.

You do not have to know anything about a topic to be able to produce these bullet points.

Step 5: What might you have to define, discuss, evaluate or comment upon in an essay on this topic? Think of three main points that you could make, without worrying about what you would say about them. Maybe you could talk about the meaning of the key concept (as in the culture sample paragraph in [Chapter 4](#)) or a key debate that could be applied (just note the idea for now). Each of the points will get its own section in the main body, which you should structure as you would a course essay. Don't forget about The 6W's Model as applying it to your thinking may help to jog your memory or produce a better structure for the points you want to include in your answer.

Step 6: If this is not jogging your memory and you are really desperate, then pull out the paradigms in psychology (you'll have learned about them in Introduction to Psychology classes). Choose two or three of the major ones so that you can spend the major paragraphs of the main body of your answer talking about the key idea expressed by those paradigms and how it can be demonstrated by and applied to the exam question.

Step 7: Organise your bullet points into an order that makes some sense as a well-structured potential answer to the question. Put your strongest one first, your weakest one second, and the other one as your final point before the concluding section. In social psychology you will learn about the primacy and recency effects and this is what you are aiming for here. Start strong and go out with a bang and the reader may forget just how weak the mid-section was. After all, the examiner will probably have several hundred essay answers to read.

Step 8: Now start writing your answer, putting it in the essay format as outlined in [Chapter 4](#) and not forgetting to put a concluding section on what you write. Make sure that you write as much as you can on each of the major points, bringing in any academic psychology that you think you can apply in a relevant way. Make sure that you try to make this construction sound like a essay rather than a series of disjointed points that go nowhere. Keep looking to the question to be certain that you are not going off on a tangent.

Yes, this could produce a descriptive and fluffy essay that does not really delve into the topic in any real way. However, you may find that the process of thinking about applying the standard essay structure before worrying about content may have jogged your memory and enabled you to write a good essay. If you never really knew much about the topic to start with then playing this game in the exam will mean that you have answered the required number of questions. Even if you only get a barely passing grade on the question you could still be getting honours overall and that is so much better than failing the exam.

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## How Long Should My Essay Answers Be?

This is a very common question and while some will reply 'as long as they need to be' that is not helpful. I suspect that the reason some academics don't answer the question is because, on a conscious level, they don't know the answer; it is not something that they've really thought about and they haven't counted up the number of pages written by students. However, I and some of my colleagues have done the math. If you are in your first year you will be expected to produce a bare minimum of four pages per hour; anything less than that and you have probably not written enough. In second year you should be aiming for five pages per hour and if you are in your third or fourth year (if your course has a fourth year) then you should be aiming for

six pages an hour. It is not that we are looking for quantity over quality; far from it – six pages of waffle are just waffle and will not score well! If you are to answer the question properly then you need to be writing at least these amounts, if not more. I have seen final year students who can achieve an exam output of eight to ten pages per hour, and that is eight to ten pages of regular-sized handwriting with regular spacing. Those students will tend to get a high 2:1 or a first in their degree.

These amounts may seem a little scary and, indeed, many students will express concern and panic when they are told just how much they will need to produce in the exam. However, if you follow the guidelines in this chapter and from [Chapter 4](#) then you will have no difficulty in reaching and even surpassing those targets, presuming that you have studied of course. Some people have a rare gift of being able to produce an excellent critical essay with a slightly shorter word count, but most of us cannot do that and so please do not take the example of someone who claims to have written just two pages per answer and got a 2:1 as being representative of what you should and can do.

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## Reducing Exam Stress

Most of us will experience stress in exams. The physiology of stress and how it effects our minds, our bodies, and our health will be come up in several courses during your degree and I am not going to go into any detail here. One of the physiological aspects of stress is that our body increases its production of cortisol and that can interfere with memory and our ability to think. By reducing your stress level you reduce the amount of cortisol that your body is producing. There are various ways in which you can reduce your stress level and some of these are described below. Maybe you can think of others. Just be sure that you do not disturb your fellow students.

## Positive Thinking

Whenever I received my exam papers and was told to start I tried to squash the stress with the following thought: 'Well, whether I'm sorted or screwed this is going to be fun!' Yes, I have been told that I have an odd concept of what's fun. In fact a mature student stood up during a class one day to tell me this, with a smile, and after I'd mentioned for about the twentieth time that year that exams can be fun! Seriously though, you have the chance to argue a point, whether or not you really believe it, to apply theories or models to different situations in fun ways, and if the exam has anonymous marking then they'll never know it was you. Try to maintain a positive attitude in the exam because if you think negatively about it you will only increase your stress levels and therefore potentially bring about a self-fulfilling prophecy.

## Breathing

The physiological state of being under stress can lead us to hyperventilate, that is to breathe too quickly. Try to breathe at a slow and steady rate (quietly) and close your eyes too if that helps. You can also try to

visualise something calming while doing this. Don't worry about wasting valuable exam time as, after all, if you are feeling very stressed you will probably just spend a lot of time engaging in panicky thinking rather than actually writing anything. Of course don't spend too long at this or any other relaxation technique in an exam, and make sure that the slow breathing and closed eyes don't make you fall asleep!

## Humour

Divert your thoughts from the exam to something humorous, something that will make you smile or even feel like chuckling. Of course don't actually chuckle as this may disturb those around you who are also taking the exam and who may be just as stressed as you feel. It could be a funny joke that you heard, or maybe something you saw on a TV show such as *Scrubs* or *The Simpsons*, or it could be an image that you bring to mind. Make sure however that you don't drift off into a sea of memories and forget all about the exam!

## Busy Work

Don't just sit there doing nothing but panicking, looking at the first page of your answer book on which you've written nothing but 1. or copied out the question from the exam paper. Make your brain focus on the task at hand by writing something. Use one answer book for rough work and make yourself break down the questions that you think you might tackle. Write down the bullet-point structure of how you would have to go about dealing with a question, even if no potential content is coming to mind. Play the 'if I knew everything' game. Just make sure that you do something rather than nothing. The very act of writing bullet points in a rough form and trying to force yourself to remain calm while reading through the questions can reduce your stress.

Sometimes stress can hit us in the middle of an exam rather than at the start and this can produce just as much panic. Again, take a moment or two here to try to do something to reduce your stress. Maybe you can even use it to produce a good exam answer. What?! Let me give you an example from my own undergraduate days. The exam was a senior undergraduate paper that counted towards our degree grade and we had to answer two questions in two hours. I had prepared well for the paper and settled in quickly. Upon completion of my first answer I switched to the second question that I had chosen: 'Why do we forget? Discuss with reference to the literature on the cognitive science of memory' (or something to that effect). I had prepared this fun topic thoroughly but as soon as I tried to start my rough work I drew a complete blank. I sat there in a panic and the sounds of rustling paper behind me, and a ticking clock that was on the wall in front of me, suddenly seemed so very loud, though not quite as loud as the sound of my pounding heart. Then I found myself laughing inwardly; this was so silly of all questions on which to draw a blank, nobody would ever believe this one. It seemed so absurd that, still chuckling to myself, I dispensed with the rough work and just started writing so my introduction went something like this:

Here I sit in an exam desperately trying to remember what I learned this year about forgetting but guess what, I've forgotten it all. What are the chances that I will remember any of the material before the invigilator calls, 'That's it, time is up, stop writing'? According to the mood state dependency

theory they're not good. Why might that be? Well, when I studied the material I was sitting relaxed in a comfortable chair and with a cup of hot chocolate (with marshmallows) in my hand. Now I am sitting in an exam hall thinking 'Oh my God! Oh my God! Oh my God! How am I going to remember any of this stuff?!' Let's see what happens then shall we?

This had the effect of reducing my stress. Before I started to think about my earlier panic I realised that more than half an hour had passed and I was most of the way through an essay on the set topic that was actually applying what I had learned during the year to a real-life situation. Most likely it was that approach that led to my high 2:1 grade on the exam. As with the 'if I knew everything' game, sometimes it is possible to turn an apparent disadvantage into an advantage.

## Breaking down the Exam

I am often amazed at the number of students who turn over the exam paper, scan it for a couple of seconds, tick some questions – and start writing. A proportion of them will always stop writing within minutes and sit there thinking or panicking. Some will even cross out what they've written, reread the questions, chew their pen, shift uncomfortably in their chair, play with their hair, take a swig of water or cola, chew gum, and try to figure out which questions they should do instead. That is not a good exam strategy.

You will know weeks or even months before the exam just how many questions you will have to answer and for how many hours you will be in the exam hall. If you have a three-hour paper in which you have to answer three questions, how much time do you have for each one? One hour? Wrong. You should always allow ten minutes at the start of the exam and ten at the end for other tasks and then break down the remaining time by the number of questions that you have to answer. In this example you could budget for a maximum of 53 minutes per question (see the [Table 6.1](#) below).

**Table 6.1 Guide to how much time you can spend on each exam question**

Duration	Questions	Time per question
3 hours	5	32 mins
	4	40 mins
	3	53 mins
	2	80 mins
2 hours	4	25 mins
	3	33 mins
	2	50 mins

Those few minutes at the start and end of the exam are where you do your rough work, break down the questions and, at the end, where you go back through your script to check for errors, omissions, readability,

and bloopers.

You may not need the full ten minutes at the start. Double-check the number of questions you must answer and whether any of them must come from specific sections. Scan through the questions and eliminate the ones that you definitely won't attempt. Then go back through them and identify the 'buzz' words and contexts. Highlight, ring, or underline these so that when you refer back to the question while writing the answer you will not forget about any of them.

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## Rough Work

Once you have broken down the question (see below) you should jot down bullet points, just as in the 'if I knew everything' game. Don't censor them, just jot down all the bullet points, key references, terms that you can think of for each question that you plan to do. Then organise them. What is your central position? What will your angle be? What will you need to mention in your introduction? What two major points (three if they will be short) are you going to make and which points that you have jotted down apply to them? Score out some and add in more, but do organise them so that you have an outline of your essay. Do not spend any more than ten minutes doing all of this or you may leave yourself short of time. While you are writing your answers refer back to the question (remember ATFQ) and your notes, crossing these off as you deal with them. You may find that while writing one essay you suddenly remember some point, information, or citation that should go in another essay. Flip back to your rough work, add it in, and then return to the one that you were writing. This saves that annoying feeling of 'oh darn, I had a great idea on that point earlier and now I've forgotten it!' If you use an answer book for rough work then you must hand it in but make sure that this is marked 'rough work'. If you are required to draw a line through your rough work then make sure that you do so. It is also important to remember that it is your essay answers that will be graded, not your rough work. In fact, we examiners do not even look at the rough work unless you've had a complete disaster on a question, and we're feeling a little generous and decide to have a look to see if there's any way that we can squeeze out a mark or two based on what your rough work suggests that you knew; however this would be very rare. Under no circumstances should you refer the examiner to your rough work for further information, which is something I have seen; we will not look.

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## Breaking down the Question

Buzz words will appear at the start of the question and also scattered throughout it. The context will often appear at the very end of the question. Buzz words are the instructions (e.g. discuss, evaluate, outline) and the topic (e.g. depression, personality, intelligence). Context is the specific angle that you are being told to consider and it is this that many students miss in an exam. Some students will spot the context but will introduce it only in the final page of their answer, almost as an afterthought; those answers score poorly. Let's go back to the three sample questions that appeared earlier in this chapter; they were all on operant conditioning and from different fictional exam papers. Don't worry what that term means right now; you will

come across it many times in your psychology classes and you don't need to know much or even anything about a topic to be able to break down an exam question or essay title.

1. Explain what is meant by operant conditioning and give examples of how it is applied in education and childcare.
2. What are the differences between classical conditioning and operant conditioning?
3. Discuss the concept of operant conditioning and show how it can be applied in a modern setting.

Think about this for a moment. What are the buzz words in these questions and what is the context in each?

Although each of these questions is asking you about operant conditioning each question is actually very different. If you had memorised an essay on the topic in the hope of being able to regurgitate it in the exam you would have found yourself in trouble. You should never find three questions on the same topic coming up on the one exam paper. We will look at each of these questions in turn.

## **Explain What is Meant by Operant Conditioning and Give Examples of How it is Applied in Education and Childcare**

The buzz words here are explain and operant conditioning so the essay will be one that talks about what the term means and how it works, giving practical examples for illustration. The context in which you have been asked to do this is education and childcare so your essay structure might be something like this:

- *Introduction:* Define operant conditioning and identify who came up with the idea; mention the key terms that are associated with this form of learning; note that it has many practical applications, including in education and childcare; make a statement as to its value and also how you will demonstrate this.
- *Main body, part 1:* Focus on education; define key components of operant conditioning and show how they can be applied; include a reference to academic studies that have shown its effectiveness in education and some that have disputed it; draw conclusions on its value in education.
- *Main body, part 2:* Focus on childcare; show how key components of operant conditioning can be applied; include a reference to academic studies that have shown its effectiveness in childcare and some that have disputed it; draw conclusions on its value in childcare.
- *Concluding section:* Remind the reader what operant conditioning is and what its major components are; summarise the key points and conclusions you have made in the main body, and then tie it all together to show how you have demonstrated the overall position

that you stated in your introduction.

What should *not* appear in this essay, or in either of the other two sample questions on operant conditioning, is any mention of Skinner boxes, pigeons, rats, or Thorndike and his cats. When you come to the topic of operant conditioning in your Introduction to Psychology class you'll know what all this means. It is remarkable just how many students will write an essay about Skinner and his rats and pigeons instead of writing an essay that explains operant conditioning and how it can be applied. Similarly, when asked to write an essay about Freud's structure of the mind or his psychosexual stages of development, for example, many students will ignore the set topic and write a mini-biography of Freud instead, throwing in the required points as brief comments near the end. The result for you will be a low grade and for the lecturer who is reading your story it will be the groan 'Oh no, not another one!'

## **What are the Differences between Classical Conditioning and Operant Conditioning?**

The buzz words here are classical conditioning and operant conditioning and the context in which you are to discuss them is in terms of how they differ. You will also have to show where they are similar but the central focus is difference. A common mistake is to launch into a discussion of classical conditioning, including a detailed retelling of the saga of Pavlov and his dogs, and then to switch to operant conditioning and spend a great deal of time talking about Skinner and his pigeons. Such an essay will score poorly. Why? Because it misses the whole point of the set essay. It also leaves out the introduction and concluding sections and includes a lot of irrelevant information about dogs and pigeons, drool and pecking.

This is, in effect, a compare and contrast question. Your introduction will make a broad statement about types of learning, state where classical and operant conditioning fit in that area, define key terms, state the difference between them, and identify the context that you have chosen in which to demonstrate this. The structure of the main body of the essay will depend on the approach that you take. For example, you might have decided to choose a context – say, health-related behaviours – and so will break up the main body into two distinct sections. The first will explain what classical conditioning is and how it works, illustrate this with examples from your chosen context, discuss the academic literature that is relevant to the issue, and then close with some summary comments with regard to what this form of learning is and how it can be seen in your chosen context. You can then move on to the second part of the main body and do the same for operant conditioning, except this time you will also need to refer back to what you have said about classical conditioning in order to demonstrate clearly the difference between the two. Your concluding section will remind the reader of what is meant by the two key terms, how they work, and how this can be clearly seen within your chosen context.

## **Discuss the Concept of Operant Conditioning and Show How it Can Be**

## **Applied in a Modern Setting**

The buzz words are discuss and operant conditioning and the context is showing how it can be applied in a modern setting. I am often amazed at the misunderstanding that many students display of the word modern. This is the early part of the twenty-first century so it's a safe bet that anything from this century can be called modern. However, why do so many talk about the fifties, sixties, seventies or eighties as being modern when we are talking about the dynamic concepts of psychology and society? I don't know the answer to this. I have marked many exam answers in which students who were supposed to be showing how something applied in a modern context wrote about experiments performed after the Second World War; the forties and fifties. I wasn't even alive then!

The introduction would require that you define operant conditioning, identify it as a form of learning, identify the specific modern setting in which you are going to apply it, and then make a statement as to its value or effectiveness. Note that the title said *a* modern setting and not in modern *settings*; you must choose one and not two or more. Within that setting you can choose two specific areas. For example, you might choose the classroom as your modern setting and decide to focus separately on behaviour management and building confidence. If this is what you decide on then you need to make this clear in your introduction. The main body, in this scenario, would be broken into two parts, one focusing on how operant conditioning works in behaviour management (including a reference to academic literature other than that contained in your textbook) and the second focusing on the application of operant conditioning in building confidence in the classroom. Your concluding section would explain briefly what is meant by operant conditioning, how it works, the key terminology, and how it applies in the setting that you have chosen.

Perhaps you have decided not to subdivide the modern setting of your choice. You might have begun your essay with a brief case study after which you introduce operant conditioning and its key terminology and state that you will demonstrate the effectiveness (or lack thereof) in applying the principles of this form of learning in dealing with and managing this particular client's problems. That would be your introduction. Your case study would have highlighted two, or maybe three, specific issues with this client and each of those will form a section of the main body of your essay. Your argument should, as always, be supported by a reference to research papers and each section would conclude with a quick statement of how effective or ineffective operant conditioning would be with the client. Your concluding section will briefly remind the reader of the case study, the principles of operant conditioning, and how they have helped, or not, with managing the client's specific problems or behaviour.

A key message that you should take from this is to be aware of what a history tutor of mine called the tyranny of information. Your textbooks and lectures may include a lot of background information but you need to be able to sift through all of that and pick out the details that are relevant to the set question. I know that this can be difficult, particularly when you are in your first year, but if you play around with past exam questions and break them down as we've done above then this should help you to be able to pick out the key information in any topic that you approach. If you are studying psychology with another subject you might be interested to

know that these strategies, for essays and exams, work in pretty much the same way for history and English literature.

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## Checking for Errors, Omissions, Readability, and Bloopers

The final ten minutes of an exam are a very important time and what you do then could make the difference between one grade or another. No, I am not talking about continuing to write on your final question. Doing that may squeeze out a mark, probably no more than 3–5 per cent on that question, which will then be divided by whatever number of questions you had to answer. That is a tiny gain that may make no difference to your overall grade; it will still be a third, 2:2, 2:1, or a first. Those final minutes should be devoted to reading back quickly through what you have written. *This* could make a huge difference to your grade because you can catch and correct any errors, omissions, illegible handwriting, or bloopers.

### Errors

The essential point was that two things were not connected but, in your haste, you left out the word 'not'. Depending on the topic this could count as one of those major errors that sees your mark plummet. If you read back through your answer you may catch such errors and be able to fix them.

### Omissions

You may remember some very important detail that should have been included. Put an \* where the additional piece should be inserted, rapidly number all of the pages of your answer book, note in the margin to 'see \* on page x', go to that page and write your point, making sure to put the \* in front of it. This could be something that was so important that leaving it out could have cost you lots of marks, but you took the time to check and have saved the day.

## Illegible and Incredibly Irritating Handwriting

You may have made a discovery worthy of a Nobel prize, but if the examiner can't read what you have written then your brilliant answer might not even get a passing grade. I have received essay scripts that contained large chunks that were completely unreadable and have failed those answers unless the rest was of a sufficient quality and quantity to pass. If you find a word or phrase that makes you pause to decipher it then rewrite this more clearly; if *you* couldn't read it first time around, how do you expect the *examiner*, who does not know your handwriting, to be able to decipher your text?

The vast majority of students will have nothing to worry about here. However, there are handwriting styles that are hard to read especially when they have been written at exam speed. Examiners may have hundreds of exam essays to evaluate in a single week and so they will have neither the time nor the patience to

reconstruct what students may have written. In addition to handwriting that is just bad there are styles of writing that can be incredibly irritating and difficult to read so these should be avoided. We are only human and if your handwriting contains any of the quirks described below then you may be causing such irritation; a negative mood can influence perception. Also, you should consider the fact that it is not only students who may have visual or reading difficulties; some of them do go on to become lecturers!

- **Hearts for dots:** I'm sorry but there is no letter in the English alphabet that has a heart on top of it. You may think that it's cute or that it's a personal style thing but it makes your script hard to read. The same goes for big circles or smilies put on top of the letters i and j; use a small dot and not an emoticon!
- **Loopy letters that are all the same size:** It looks like page after page of @@@@and it can cost marks because at least some of the points made were unreadable.
- **Overly loopy letters:** If a word ends with the letter d then do not have a streamer that extends across the whole of the word, curling over the first letter or ending with a pointed tip. Similarly the top of an s should not extend across the length of the word. A lowercase f that looks like a staple on its side may look lovely in slowly-written text, but it becomes a confusing squiggle that could be any of several letters (or a combination of letters) when written at exam speed, particularly if the writing is also slanted. Overly elaborate handwriting like this will also cost you time.
- **Blocked capitals:** Scripts written entirely in blocked capitals can be hard on the eyes and mood, especially if they are in the seemingly preferred presentation of tiny blocked capitals. Blocked capitals are usually taken to mean shouting so why are you screaming your answers at us? Please do not write your exams in blocked capitals.
- **Tiny writing:** Tired eyes that have read hundreds of answers can find it very hard to process page after page of tiny lettering. I have seen passages in exam scripts whose letters were so tiny and barely distinguishable that they looked more like Morse code than sentences written in the English language.
- **Huge writing:** Huge writing can be hard to read as letters on one line are often over-written by letters on the line below.
- **Text/chat speak:** This has no place whatsoever in your essays or exams and any submission that is written in text/chat speak will fail.
- **Incomplete letter formation:** I have had to read exam scripts where letters were missing pieces so that many were hard to distinguish from one another. It also looks like some form of Morse code!
- **Extremely slanted writing:** If your writing slants badly to the left or right then please orient your answer book in such a way that it compensates for this and that the letters appear at least close to upright on the page. I have received exam scripts where I had to tilt them practically on their side to have any hope of reading what was on the pages.

- **A finger between each word:** If you put a big space between each word you are creating unnecessary difficulty for any reader who may have a contrast perception difficulty (it's a visual problem). It also creates the impression that you are trying to make it look like you have more to say than you really do.
- **Misuse of capital letters:** Do not start every word or most words in a sentence with a capital letter! It is grammatically incorrect and can be very difficult to read if the examiner has any of a number of visual difficulties.

## Bloopers

Students can make some wonderful bloopers in their exam answers, so amusing that some academics will keep lists of them; they can be a useful teaching tool to both the lecturer and other students. There is a wonderful book called *Non Campus Mentis*, which is a collection of bloopers made by American and Canadian university students in history exams. It was a bestseller and it is so funny that I had to put it down by [Chapter 3](#) to wait for the pain in my chest to subside and the tears in my eyes to dry.

Your exam bloopers may be fairly harmless and also provide entertainment for the reader, but they may be errors that cost you marks. Watch out for them and either correct or eliminate them. Some will just be funny but others will suggest that the writer probably doesn't really know what s/he is talking about; that is not the impression that you want to create in an exam! The following are genuine examples that I have found in submissions I have graded over the years. You may not see what is wrong with these as yet but as you study more psychology you will spot the reasons why they're here. Make sure that your exam answers do not include further examples.

- Thorndike taught animals psychologically certain behaviours and when and how to use them.
- The statistical paradigm involves examining tests and compiling bell curves of behaviour.
- The Learning Approach is where you drink and feel sick afterwards.
- Beck is the most famous researcher in alcoholism.
- Psychotherapy is where Freud sat down to talk to someone.
- Humanistic is also known as the disease model.
- There was a t-score of 2.53 on the asymp sig two-tailed test and this score was significant.
- Operant conditioning is also known as Pavlovian conditioning because of the research that Ivan Pavlov did in this field.
- Skinner put cats in boxes and when they found the button and pressed it and got out of the box he came up with his theory of operant conditioning.
- The two most important things to consider in what is abnormal behaviour are reliability and validity.

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## Instruction Terms (e.g. Discuss, Describe, etc.)

You have probably done many exams by this stage of your life and so you will be familiar with the different instruction terms that appear in questions. However, regardless of what they appear to be telling you to do it is very important that you include at least some degree of evaluation in your exam answers. If you do not then you are likely to produce an entirely descriptive essay that cannot score beyond a 2:2.

- **Compare and contrast:** Requires you to show how two things (e.g. theories, models, approaches, methods, etc.) are similar to and different from each other. A useful approach is to apply a context within which you will examine them and to use academic literature to aid a critical evaluation.
- **Critically evaluate:** Requires a detailed analysis of the concept, theory, model, or statement that has been presented, with copious references to academic literature to support your arguments.
- **Describe:** Requires a brief description of the key concept but also that you go beyond a mere regurgitation of your course book and lecture notes, referring to academic literature and including some degree of evaluation. Many students perform poorly on 'describe' questions.
- **Discuss:** This is like a critical evaluation in that you have been given a statement or premise and it is up to you to tease it out and evaluate it. It may include elements of description, compare and contrast, and illustration.
- **Explain:** Requires some details beyond what you might include in a discussion or evaluation as you must explain how something works and how it may be applied in one or more current settings. You should remain objective and include references to the academic literature.
- **Illustrate:** You may be using diagrams and/or applying concepts to practical situations but this will be similar to 'explain' and 'discuss'.
- **Outline:** Requires that you give just a brief description of the concept but also that you develop your answer by talking about each point, with a reference to the academic literature, rather than just listing a series of points.

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## Tips for Disabled Students

Doing exams is stressful but it can be more so for a student who may have to take their exams in a different centre to the rest of their classmates. If you have a disability impairment, or health issue that requires some assistance or modification to your exam setting then you need to contact your university's Disability Services at the start of the academic year. They will help to arrange any assistance that you might require during the year, for example someone to help with reading, photocopying, note taking at lectures, essay and report

typing, and/or exam accommodations.

If you are registered with the Disability Services and are physically capable of writing the exam by yourself then you may be allowed an extra ten minutes per hour of the exam. Most dyslexic students, for example, will be able to avail themselves of this. If extra time is the only accommodation being granted to you then you will most likely be with a small number of other students. If, however, you need the assistance of a reader, scribe, computer, tape recorder, or any other form of assistive technology then you will be placed in a room occupied only by yourself, your assistant (if one is needed), and the invigilator. The absence of other exam-takers can make it very hard to switch into 'exam-mode thinking' as it will not really feel like you're in an exam. There is nobody to talk to beforehand – with everyone else in a different centre – and all your friends will have gone by the time you are finished. If you have always done your exams in isolation then this may not affect you, but if you have acquired your difficulty more recently (you might have broken both your arms in an accident, for example) then it can be a strange experience. Most invigilators will sit away from you and read a book or a newspaper while keeping a discreet eye on you, but if one sits too close don't be afraid to ask them to back off a little. The feeling of being closely watched – and it is you that is being watched, there's nobody else there! – can increase your stress levels.

If you are going to be doing your exams in isolation then I would recommend that you:

- do your exam preparation in isolation too. Get yourself used to being in an academic frame of mind while alone or with just one or two people around rather than spending hours sitting in a crowded library. This will make the comparative silence of your exam room seem less striking than it would be if you have studied only in crowded places.
- have a ticking clock in the room while you are studying so that you learn to habituate to the sound. It is remarkable how there will often be a loudly-ticking clock in the room and it will be placed square in front of you!
- find the exact location of your centre at least a few days before the exam; you won't have classmates to follow on the day.
- avail yourself of any training provided on the assistive technologies that you may be using.
- bring along two pens, pencils, ruler, etc., even if you are typing your exam. You will still have to complete the front of the answer booklets into which your printed script will be inserted. If you have to draw diagrams use the answer booklet, number the pages, and then refer the reader to the specific page that contains the diagram.
- bring a bottle of water and maybe a few sugary sweets. Sometimes students taking an exam in isolation are placed in a small, poorly ventilated room that can get really hot and stuffy after an hour or two.
- don't forget to stop briefly every half hour or so to stretch and flex your arms, hands and shoulders so that they won't cramp if you are typing. You may be doing several exams in a single week and that can put quite a strain on your hands and arms, particularly if a

- problem with one or both of those limbs is the reason why you are typing in the first place.
  - if the assistive equipment that you are using starts to malfunction in any way, speak up immediately – this can happen!
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## Summary

Almost everyone will feel some degree of stress about taking exams but if you have followed these guidelines and prepared well for the task then you should do just fine, even if it is many years since you last sat an exam. Preparing for and taking MCQ tests is a different experience than doing essay exams as the skills being utilised are not the same; one relies on memorisation and regurgitation whereas the other requires knowledge, understanding, the ability to evaluate the material, and to write about it in a clear and fluent manner. It is very important that you try to remain calm in any exam, that you read the questions carefully, and that you always answer the required number. Do not answer more than that; if you had to do three but you did four then only your first three answers will be read and marked. Structure your essay answers in the same way that you would structure your course essays, keep rereading the question to make sure that you are not going off topic, and make sure that you organise your exam time well so that you can complete the paper without resorting to bullet points and 'out of time!' messages that will not be factored into your grade.

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