



## **Social Psychology**

### **Exam Tips**

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## Exam Tips

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This section will enable you to:

- develop strategies for controlling your nervous energy
- tackle worked examples of time and task management in exams
- attend to the practical details associated with the exam
- stay focused on the exam questions
- link revision outlines to strategy for addressing exam questions

## Handling your Nerves

Exam nerves are not unusual and it has been concluded that test anxiety arises because of the perception that your performance is being evaluated, that the consequences are likely to be serious and that you are working under the pressure of a time restriction. However, it has also been asserted that the activation of the autonomic nervous system is adaptive in that it is designed to prompt us to take action in order to avoid danger. If you focus on the task at hand rather than on feeding a downward negative spiral in your thinking patterns, this will help you to keep your nerves under control. In the run up to your exams, you can practice some simple relaxation techniques that will help you bring stress under control.

*It is a very good thing if you can interpret your nervous reactions positively, but the symptoms are more likely to be problematic if you interpret them negatively, pay too much attention to them or allow them to interfere with your exam preparation or performance.*

Practices that may help reduce or buffer the effects of exam stress are:

- listening to music
- going for a brisk walk
- simple breathing exercises
- some muscle relaxation
- watching a movie
- enjoying some laughter
- doing some exercise
- relaxing in a bath (with music if preferred).

The best choice is going to be the one (or combination) that works best for you – perhaps to be discovered by trial and error. Some of the above techniques can be practised on the morning of the exam, and even the memory of them can be used just before the exam. For example, you could run over a relaxing tune in your head and have this echo inside you as you enter the exam room. The idea behind all this is, first, stress levels must come down, and second, relaxing thoughts will serve to displace stressful reactions. It has been said that stress is the body's call to take action, but anxiety is a maladaptive response to that call.

*It is important to be convinced that your stress levels can come under control, and that you can have a say in this. Do not give anxiety a vacuum to work in.*

## Time Management with Examples

The all-important matter as you approach an exam is to develop the belief that you can take control over the situation. As you work through the list of issues that you need to address, you will be able to tick them off one by one. One of the issues you will need to be clear about before the exam is the length of time you should allocate to each question. Sometimes this can be quite simple (although it is always necessary to read the rubric carefully), for example, if two questions are to be answered in a two-hour paper, you should allow one hour for each question. If it is a two-hour paper with one essay question and five shorter answers, you could allow one hour for the essay and 12 minutes each for the shorter questions. However, you always need to check out the weighting for the marks on each question, and you will also need to deduct whatever time it takes you to read over the paper and to choose your questions. Work out a time management strategy in the exercise below. More importantly, give yourself some practice on the type of papers you are likely to face.

*Remember to check if the structure of your exam paper is the same as in previous years, and do not forget that excessive time on your “strongest” question may not compensate for very poor answers to other questions. Also ensure that you read the rubric carefully in the exam.*

## Exercise

**Working out the division of exam labour by time.**

1. **A 3-hour paper with four compulsory questions (equally weighted in marks).**
2. **A 3-hour paper with two essays and ten short questions (each of the three sections carry one-third of the marks).**
3. **A 2-hour paper with two essay questions and 100 multiple-choice questions (half marks are on the two essays and half marks on the multiple choice section).**

*Get into the calculating frame of mind and be sure to have the calculations done before starting the exam. Ensure that the structure of the exam has not changed since the last one. Also deduct the time taken to read over the paper in allocating time to each question.*

*Suggested answers to previous exercise:*

- 1 This allows 45 minutes for each question (4 questions × 45 minutes = 2 hours). However, if you allow 40 minutes for each question, this will give you 20 minutes (4 questions × 5 minutes) to read over the paper and plan your outlines.*
- 2 In this example you can spend 1 hour on each of the two major questions, and 1 hour on the ten short questions. For the two major questions you could allow 10 minutes for reading and planning on each, and 50 minutes for writing. In the ten short questions, you could allow 6 minutes in total for each (10 questions × 6 minutes = 60 minutes). However, if you allow approximately 1 minute reading and planning time, this will allow 5 minutes writing time for each question.*
- 3 In this case you have to divide 120 minutes by three questions – this allows 40 minutes for each. You could, for example, allow 5 minutes reading/planning time for each essay and 35 minutes for writing (or 10 minutes reading/planning and 30 minutes writing). After you have completed the two major questions you are left with 40 minutes to tackle the 100 multiple-choice questions.*

*You may not be able to achieve total precision in planning time for tasks, but you will have a greater feeling of control and confidence if you have some reference points to guide you.*

## Task Management with Examples

After you have decided on the questions you wish to address, you then need to plan your answers. Some students prefer to plan all outlines and draft work at the beginning, whilst others prefer to plan and address one answer before proceeding to address the next question. Decide on your strategy before you enter the exam room, and stick to your plan. When you have done your draft outline as rough work, you should allocate an appropriate time for each section. This will prevent you from excessive treatment of some aspects, whilst falling short on other parts. Such careful planning will help you to achieve balance, fluency and symmetry.

*Keep awareness of time limitations; this will help you to write succinctly, keep focused on the task and prevent you dressing up your responses with unnecessary padding.*

Some students put as much effort into their rough work as they do into their exam essay.

*An over-elaborate mind map may give the impression that the essay is little more than a repetition of this detailed structure, and that the quality of the content has suffered because too much time was spent on the plan.*

## Exercise

Work the time allocation for the following outline, allowing for one hour on the question. Deduct 10 minutes taken at the beginning for choice and planning.

Discuss theories of attitude change

1. ***Cognitive dissonance***

- (a) **Inconsistency leads to change, brought about by effort justification, induced compliance and free choice.**
- (b) **Supported by Festinger and Carlsmith.**
- (c) **Criticisms of model.**

2. ***Elaboration likelihood model***

- (a) **Persuasion leads to attitude change, much effort = central route, little effort = peripheral route.**
- (b) **Support for model.**
- (c) **Criticisms of model.**

## Attend to Practical Details

This short section is designed to remind you of the practical details that should be attended to in preparation for an exam. There are always students who turn up late, or to the wrong venue or for the wrong exam, or do not turn up at all! Check and re-check that you have all the details of each exam correctly noted. What you don't need is to arrive late and then have to tame your panic reactions. The exam season is the time when you should aim to be at your best.

*Turn up to the right venue in good time so that you can quieten your mind and bring your stress under control.*

Make note of the details in the checklist below and ensure that you have taken control of each one.

#### **Checklist Practical exam details**

- ? Check that you have the correct venue.
- ? Make sure you know how to locate the venue before the exam day.
- ? Ensure that the exam time you have noted is accurate.
- ? Allow sufficient time for your journey and consider the possibility of delays.
- ? Bring an adequate supply of stationery including spare items such as pens etc.
- ? Bring a watch for your time and task management.
- ? You may need some liquid, such as a small bottle of still water.
- ? You may also need to bring some tissues.
- ? Observe whatever exam regulations your university/college has set in place.
- ? Fill in required personal details before the exam begins.

#### **Control Wandering Thoughts**

In a simple study conducted in the 1960s, Ganzer found that students who frequently lifted their heads and looked away from their scripts during exams tended to perform poorly. This makes sense because it implies that the students were taking too much time out when they should have been on task. *One way to fail your exam is to get up and walk out of the test room, but another way is to “leave” the test room mentally by being preoccupied with distracting thoughts.* The distracting thoughts may be either related to the exam itself or totally irrelevant to it. The net effect of both these forms of intrusion is to distract you from the task at hand and debilitate your test performance. Read over the two lists of distracting thoughts presented below.

#### *Typical test-relevant thoughts (evaluative):*

- I wish I had prepared better.
- I wonder what will the examiner think.
- Others are doing better than me.
- What I am writing is nonsense.
- Can't remember important details.

#### *Characteristic test-irrelevant thoughts (non-evaluative):*

- looking forward to this weekend.
- Which video should I watch tonight?
- His remark really annoyed me yesterday!
- Wonder how the game will go on Saturday?
- I wonder if he/she really likes me?

Research has consistently shown that distracting, intrusive thoughts during an exam are more detrimental to performance than stressful symptoms such as sweaty palms, dry mouth, tension, trembling and so on. Moreover, it does not matter whether the distracting thoughts are negative evaluations related to the exam or are totally irrelevant to the exam. The latter may be a form of escape from the stressful situation.

*Checklist. Practical Suggestions for Controlling Wandering Thoughts*

- ? Be aware that this problem is detrimental to performance.
- ? Do not look around to find distractions.
- ? If distracted, write down “keep focused on task”.
- ? If distracted again, look back at above and continue to do this.
- ? Start to draft rough work as soon as you can.
- ? If you struggle with initial focus, then re-read or elaborate on your rough work.
- ? If you have commenced your essay, re-read you last paragraph (or two).
- ? Do not throw fuel on your distracting thoughts – starve them by re-engaging with the task at hand.

**Links to Revision**

If you have followed the guidelines given for revision, you will be well equipped with outline plans when you enter the exam room. You may have chosen to use headings and subheadings, mind maps, hierarchical approaches or just a series of simple mnemonics. Whatever method you choose to use, you should be furnished with a series of memory triggers that will open the treasure house door for you once you begin to write.

*Although you may have clear templates with a definite structure or framework for organising your material, you will need to be flexible about how this should be applied to your exam questions.*

**Example: How to use Memory Triggers**

Imagine that attitudes are one of the topics that you will be examined on. You decide to memorise lists of attitudes.

*Attitude formation:*

- Behavioural – direct experience, conditioning, observation.
- Cognitive – information integration, self-perception, mood-as-information, heuristics, persuasion.

*Relationship between attitudes and behaviour:*

- Compatability
- Aggregation
- Strength
- Expectancy value models

*Key thinkers/attitude change:*

- Cognitive dissonance (Festinger)
- Elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo)
- Heuristic systematic model (Chaiken)

*Measurement:*

- Thurstone
- Likert scale
- Semantic differential scale
- Sociometry
- Scalogram

The basic mental template might be these and a few other categories. You know that you will not need every last detail, although you may need to select a few from each category. For example, you might be asked to discuss:

- psychologists' attempts to change people's attitudes;
- the relationship between attitudes and behaviour;
- attitude formation; or
- theories of attitude change.

*Restrict your material to what is relevant to the question, but bear in mind that this may allow you some scope.*

**The Art of “Name Dropping”**

In most topics at university you will be required to cite studies as evidence for your arguments and to link these to the names of researchers, scholars or theorists. It will help if you can use the correct dates, or at least the decades, and it is good to demonstrate that you have used contemporary sources and have done some independent work. A marker will have dozens if not hundreds of scripts to work through and they will know if you are just repeating the same phrases from the same sources as every one else. There is inevitably a certain amount of this that must go on, but there is room for you to add fresh and original touches that demonstrate independence and imagination.

*Give the clear impression that you have done more than the bare minimum and that you have enthusiasm for the subject. Also, spread the use of researchers' names across your exam essay rather than compressing them into, for example, the first and last paragraphs.*

## Flight, Fight or Freeze

As previously noted, the autonomic nervous system (ANS) is activated when danger or apparent danger is imminent. Of course the threat does not have to be physical, as in the case of an exam, a job interview, a driving test or a television appearance. Indeed, the ANS can be activated even at the anticipation of a future threat. However, the reaction is more likely to be stronger as you enter into the crucial time of testing or challenge. Symptoms may include deep breathing, trembling, headaches, nausea, tension, dry mouth and palpitations. How should we react to these once they have been triggered? A postman might decide to run away from a barking dog and run the risk of being chased and bitten. A second possible response is to freeze on the spot – this might arrest the animal in its tracks, but is no use in an exam situation. In contrast, to fight might not be the best strategy against the dog, but will be more productive in an exam. That is, you are going into the exam room to “tackle” the questions, and not to run away from the challenge before you.

The final illustration below uses the analogy of archery to demonstrate how you might take control in an exam.

### *Example: Lessons from Archery*

- Enter the exam room with a quiver full of arrows – all the points you will need to use.
- Eye up the target board you are to shoot at – choose the exam questions.
- Stand in good position for balance and vision – prepare your time management.
- Prepare your bow and arrow and take aim at the target – keep focused on the task at hand and do not be sidetracked.
- Pull the string of the bow back to get maximum thrust on the arrow – match your points to the appropriate question.
- Aim to hit the board where the best marks are (bull's-eye or close) – do not be content with the minimum standard such as a mere pass.
- Pull out arrows and shoot one after another to gain maximum hits and advantage – do not be content with preparing just one or two strong points.
- Make sure your arrows are sharp and the supporting bow and string are firm – choose relevant points and support with evidence.
- Avoid wasted effort by loose and careless shots – do not dress up your essay with unnecessary padding.

### Exercise

**Write your own checklist on the range of combined skills and personal qualities that you will need to be at your best in an exam.**

- ✓ .....
- ✓ .....
- ✓ .....
- ✓ .....
- ✓ .....

*With reference to the above exercise, skills might include such things as critical thinking, time and task management, focus on issues, and quick identification of problems to address. Personal qualities might include factors such as confidence, endurance, resilience and stress control.*

- time management
- multiple-choice questions
- essays
- time on task
- elaboration likelihood model
- checklist
- attitude change

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