

How to write an exam—EXAM101.

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Abstract

This document basically stems from my frustration at people doing stupid things that are *very easy to avoid, but lose a lot of marks in the process*. The other side of the same coin, a similar frustration occurs when I am asked “why I lost one mark, but the answer is right”. This particular frustration can have a fairly violent expression. :-)

1 Basic Premise

Much of what I have to say on this topic stems from the following basic premise as to the *purpose* of an examination:

It is *your* job to convince *me* that *you* know what you are doing. It is *NOT* my job to extract some thread of quirky logic from a morass of random scribblings.¹

2 Before the Exam.

- *ENSURE* that you know *where* and *when* the examination will take place, and even *what* is being examined.²
- Get to 'varsity at least 25 minutes before the due time, and to the venue at least 15 minutes before the due time. If you are late, it simply adds to the general panic. The rule is that latecomers are only allowed into the venue during the first half an hour, and officially, no extra time is given! ³
- Bring *two* pens and *two* pencils, with spare lead/ink etc. Make sure that the pencil is a dark one (HB) and that you have an eraser. This is particularly important for Multiple Choice Questions.
- For ELEN302, bring a ruler, a compass (for Smith charts), and differently coloured pens/pencils as this assists in differentiating points on the Chart, for example.
- Bring *two* calculators, or spare batteries!!!
- If allowed (check your Course Outline), bring a *handwritten* formula sheet. Generally, printed or photocopied sheets are not permitted.⁴
- Check and re-check your allocated seat number, *and sit there!!*

¹Given the amount of time that I can devote to reading the answer, you need to get the maximum amount across in the clearest possible manner! (100 Students, 5 questions each, at only 5 minutes per question, that translates to over a week of full-time marking, doing nothing else!!, but often takes more than 5 mins/question.)

²I do not think that I have ever seen a paler face, and a more contemplative expression than the chap who realized that he was writing Signal Processing, not High Frequency Techniques only when I handed him the question paper. I believe his words were: “But...”

³Do *NOT* try to do a last-minute conflag with your fellow students. It does not assist!

⁴I was once asked by student *A* whether he could ask student *B* for an explanation of a finer point on the sheet. $E = mc^2$ ensued :-)

- Bring your student card, or an ID document. In the rare event that a lecturer does not know you (where have you been?), bring *some* form of ID.

3 Whilst in the venue, *before* the Exam begins.

- Fill in the **Attendance Register**. Pay particular attention to the **Row** and **Seat Number**.
- Fill in the **Exam Script** info. Pay *very* particular attention to the **Row** and **Seat Number**.

The reason for all this emphasis on seat numbers etc is that the fold-down flap on the answer books covers the name. At the end of the exam session, we have to prove that everyone has handed in a paper. (Or you might get 0 :-)⁵

The purpose of the flap is to discourage bias in the marking of the paper, and to provide entertainment when it comes to opening them. Its the best glue I've seen.⁶

- Check the staples of your answer book. If they are not adequate, and pages fall out, it will be a Sad Day for England. Get a new one before the exam starts.
- Once the question papers have been handed out, check that it has all its pages, and that there are no blank photocopying blapses. Generally, page numbers are indicated as "Page 1 of 8"
- In a multi-exam session, check that you have the right paper.⁷
- Write down the starting time of the exam, and pace yourself accordingly. In general, but with some exceptions, the amount of effort required is proportional to the number of allocated marks.
- **READ THE INSTRUCTIONS**. Especially how many questions you need to answer, and which ones are compulsory!⁸
- Ask yourself why things are *emphasized* or **bold**, or even ***Emphasized bold***. Don't look for the "hidden meaning"—look for the overt meaning.
- Try to calm down. An exam is a rather stressful time :-) Pray, meditate, relax.

4 The Writing.

- **READ THE ENTIRE PAPER**. What I mean by this, is that you should read the entire paper. This is best accomplished by reading the entire paper.

You have 5 "free" minutes to do so⁹.

- *Plan* what you are going to answer, and in what order. Do **NOT** attempt to answer something that you really don't know as the first question you attempt. It tends to "throw" the exam somewhat :-). Generally, you may answer any question, or sub-question in any order.
- If you **DO** answer 5(a),4(b),3(c),5(b),2(a)... for heaven's sake *number the pages*, and say things like "Q5 continued on page 17".
- *Start each new question on a new page*.

⁵I once assisted in invigilating a first year economics course, with over 1200 students in Hall 29 (ONE paper). A good 10% of the class was mis-seated. There were, I think, about 30 invigilators all calling student numbers out to each other. The JSE had nothing on it.

⁶Rumour has it that a senior academic opposed them in the Senate, since it would no longer allow him to mark affirmatively :-)

⁷Not too difficult for us engineers, but I was in a venue where they switched Philosophy I and II. This was brought to light one hour after the start :-)

⁸One of the reasons I have moved away from the 5 out of 7 question format, is that in *EVERY* exam, I had two or three bleary-eyed chaps after the exam that answered all 7!

⁹I suppose that most of you have forgotten, but in the 80's, the SRC battled to get that concession out of the 11th floor... *Use It*

- READ THE QUESTION. PROPERLY.
- *Draw a pretty picture*, ie Sketch the circuit, transmission line, phasor diagram, etc as appropriate *even if its on the question paper anyway*. It sorts it out in your mind, and the lecturer can easily refer to the variables that you have chosen.
- Make a summary of what is required. This is important, as far to often, various “bits” of the question are not answered. Tick off what you have answered against this checklist.
- Start each new question with a clear “Question 1” type statement, not just an obscure numeral tucked away somewhere.
- Fill in the question number answered on each page at the top. This is not a sufficient indication of a question, though, see previous point!
- Do *NOT* write in the margins marked “Do not write in these margins”!!!!!! I am sorely tempted not to mark the material in the margins. Where am I supposed to write?
- Write absolutely legibly.
- Do not “go over” penned text. The end result is completely illegible. People that do this also tend to use the most hideous pens!!! Buy a good old fashioned Bic, orange fine point, el cheapo, *that does not blotch!*
- Rule off non-considered sections. Do Not use Tippex to erase a full page. (This has happened :-) Don’t forget that most lecturers will give some consideration in a tight squeeze for a correct, well worked answer, that has been ruled off. Its a wee bit more difficult after the Tippex.
- By all means, use a pencil. Do be aware that if you use pencil during a *test* (which you get back), though, that you may forfeit the ability to get it re-marked. Do not erase more than once or twice. Rule it off, and start afresh. Mondi is not likely to strain for a few more pages.
- Use point form. Make the “answers” stand out. Don’t embed answers within a paragraph of explanation. *Summarize answers seperately.*
- Don’t write reams and reams of waffle. Do put in all reasoning. Balance these two.
- If a part (b) question says “If the program in part (a) doesn’t terminate, explain why” for 5 marks, *rest assured it doesn’t terminate!! Wragies...*
- In general, most numbers in exam situations are well cooked. You should be expecting transmission lines that are $\lambda/4$ or $\lambda/2$ multiples. If you do get a transmission line to be 1.234567321λ long, take another look.¹⁰
- If a question says “In 5 lines, explain...” *DO NOT write 2 pages.*
- DO NOT write down the answer only. It will NOT attract marks. I want the reasoning, the development, the understanding. Very often, the answer is wrong, and then zero is the only option I have. If you at least give me some reasoning...
- Answer the question. Do *NOT* answer your own question!!!
- Write something. Anything. It is extremely difficult to manufacture the required “extra two marks” needed for a scrape from blank paper. At least summarize the question, and attempt *something...*

Time’s Up!

- *STOP WRITING.* You are not going to change much by your illegible scrawl in the last 30 seconds. It is unfair on everyone else, and makes getting and checking papers hazardous. If your paper is lost in this procedure, its your baby.

¹⁰On the other hand...

- There are some idiotic Chief invigilators in this University that bow to “student pressure” when the collection of scripts is occurring, and publicly announce that students can leave the venue. Do yourself and your fellow students a favour. . . If you can see that all the papers have not yet been collected, *remain seated!* If a paper goes missing in this turmoil, it is truly a Sad Day for England. . .

Final Word

Remember that it is a simple fact of life that a pleasantly laid out, neat, logically presented examination paper *will* gain a higher mark than the one where the information is not explicit and clear.

There is a “mythconception” that “we are out to get them”. Please note that the School only gets decent credit (funding) for *completed* students.

The online version is <http://ytdp.ee.wits.ac.za/ExamWritingSkills.html>