



Carleton Community High School

A Specialist Science with Mathematics School



Exam Tips for Students

Get enough sleep

You're far more likely to perform at your best if you've had a good night's sleep. It's tempting to stay up into the small hours cramming but you'll be doing yourself a disservice. Give your brain some resting time and it will work better for you when it really matters.

Eat a good breakfast

Your brain is like a car and it needs fuel. Nerves might make you feel too sick to eat – but do try. You wouldn't dream of doing a massive workout if you hadn't eaten enough food. An exam's no different – it's a physical workout for your brain. I was always advised to eat a banana and a biscuit just before going into an exam. The banana slowly released energy throughout the whole exam whilst the biscuit gave me a quick burst to get me going.

Don't try and cram

At this late stage the chances of you taking on board any more information are slim. You're more likely just to panic yourself. You might choose to calmly review your revision notes, but don't try and cover new ground.

Be prepared

Make sure you have everything you need ready in plenty of time, you don't want to be rushing around at the last minute looking for a pencil case or calculator. I'd recommend getting everything you need ready the night before the exam as it will be one less thing to play on your mind.

Get it into perspective

It can be easy to see your exams as the biggest and most terrible thing that's ever happened to you – and there's no denying the fact that they're very important. But try not to let things get out of proportion. Whatever happens, in a few hours this particular exam will be over. You'll have done your best and that's what really matters.

Arrive in plenty of time

This is absolutely essential. Make sure you arrive several minutes before your exam. This will give you a chance to make sure you've definitely got everything you need and give you a chance to mentally prepare yourself. At worst arriving late will mean you're not even allowed to sit your exam, at best it will leave you flustered and panicked which is likely to prevent you from doing your best. Don't spend the last few minutes before the exam talking to your friends and worrying about what you do and don't know. Find a quiet corner and relax, or flick through your revision cards.

Relax and drink (water!)

When you enter the exam room take a few moments just to relax. Breathe deeply. Think about the celebrations to come when your exams are over and remember that however scary it feels, this is just an exam and it will be over soon. The more relaxed you are, the more likely you are to be able to access bits of knowledge and information hidden in your subconscious. Take a bottle of water with you and if you feel the panic rising at any moment sit back, breathe deeply and take a few sips.

Read every question twice

Read the question. Make sure you understand it. Then read it again. Only then should you start thinking about your answer. If you've done a lot of revision it can be very easy to fall into the trap of answering the question you expected rather than the question that has actually been asked. Don't fall into that trap. Take time to read, understand and reread each question and you'll be fine.

Think carefully about which questions to answer

If you have to make a decision over which questions to answer, don't enter into this decision too lightly. Read and understand all of the questions, have a think about how you would tackle each one – maybe even take a minute or two to write a very brief plan if you're struggling to decide between a couple of questions. Only once you're sure that you've made a final decision should you embark on your answer. You absolutely do NOT want to waste time by changing your mind about which question to answer when you're halfway through an essay. You'd be amazed how often people fall into that trap by failing to take a moment or two to think before writing.

Give yourself a confidence boost

There's no need to answer the questions in order. If there's a question that you know you can answer brilliantly, do it first. It will give your confidence a real boost and put you in a great mindset for the rest of the exam. You can approach the whole paper like this, answering the easiest questions first and tackling the hard questions later – just make sure you don't miss any.

Take time to plan

It never pays not to plan your answers. This is especially true of essay questions. It can be tempting just to start writing – especially if it feels like everyone around you is already writing away. Think of it like the tortoise and the hare. By taking a few moments to plan out your answer you'll enter into it fully prepared, you won't miss out anything, you'll just plod on through. You'll soon find that those who started writing too fast run out of steam and get themselves in a muddle. Remember it's not like working at home – you're not going to be able to go back later and cut and paste a paragraph you've forgotten!

Keep your answers in proportion with the marks awarded

Notice how many marks are awarded for each question and make your answer of an appropriate length. You might know everything there is to know on a topic but if it's only worth two marks you can't possibly get more than that – even if you write an essay. It's a simple rule that's often over looked – a small number of marks needs a small answer, big marks... BIG answer.

Keep track of time

It feels like exams are set in a parallel universe where time goes by at double speed. Before the exam you should have taken time to get familiar with the typical structure of the paper and how long many questions you'll need to answer and how long you'll have for each one. Hopefully you'll have done a couple of practice papers under exam conditions to get used to how much time you have. In the exam make sure you have a watch with you and that you keep a very careful track of the time.

Answer every question

Do NOT spend too long on a question. If you run out of time, move on – you can come back at the end if you have time. Many students lose a lot of marks by spending a disproportionate amount of time on early questions which means their later answers are very poor or missing altogether. It's much easier to get the first few marks on a question than the last few so your overall grade is likely to be better if you attempt everything than if you answer only some of the questions perfectly. If you don't know the answer, think hard and record your best guess. You'll be surprised how often you get it right! (Don't use this technique if you there is a negative marking scheme – i.e. you lose marks for wrong answers. This is unusual). If you're running short of time, answering a question in notes or bullet points is better than not answering at all.

Show your drafts and working

Whether it's an essay plan or some maths working make sure you show it. By all means cross it through but ensure it remains legible. If you run out of time you'll sometimes get some marks for your working or plan if the examiner can see where you were headed with your answer and in maths you can sometimes get some marks even if you got the answer wrong if your working is correct.

Check back through your paper

Take time to check back through your paper. Have you filled out all your details correctly? Have you answered all the questions / the right number of questions? (make sure no pages are stuck together – this has happened to me!) Have you followed instructions correctly?

There's no need for an autopsy

It's tempting after an exam to talk endlessly about it with your friends or go back to your books and work out what you got right and wrong – but I'll let you into a secret – THERE'S NOTHING YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT! – Your time is better spent preparing for the next exam than picking apart the last one. It's usually a very negative exercise that will set you in bad stead for future exams as we tend to remember the few answers we got wrong rather than those questions we sailed through so you'll think you did a lot worse than you actually did. You did your best... now move on!