

Examination Strategies

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This file was prepared by Max Darby in September 2009. Additional information can be found in the student text book *Art Connections* (Max Darby and Jenny Aland, Heinemann Books)

This file outlines some simple strategies to help you to manage written examinations. It can also be applied to written tests. While much of the information is directed to the writing of essays, it is also appropriate for short answer questions.

Preparation during the year

Begin study and preparation for the examination or test well in advance. It is always best to work consistently during class time and during the course rather than to leave it all to a rush at the last minute.

It is important to devote additional study time during the course to make sure you are familiar with what has been taught and to make sure it is all clearly recorded

All of these things make examination preparation easier than they might be. They also usually relieve pressure and ease stress – 2 significant factors in making examinations easier than they are for some people.

Preparation for the examination itself

Try to get enough sleep. About 8 hours each day is recommended. This can sometimes be easier said than done. Doing the things listed above removes much of the stress that under-preparation can bring. Sleep is easier when you know you have done everything during the course that you could possibly be expected to do. A good point to remember is that *“The more work you do, the less stress you will have.”*

Eat a balanced diet and drink lots of water and try to remove the use of ‘junk foods’. This is good advice for life but is very important during potential times of stress. You need everything going for you and the body needs to be well provided with the best forms of energy.

Have an established place at home to study. Having a set place to study emphasises in your mind that when you ‘go there to work’ then work is what you will do – and not something else! The place should be clean and tidy, well lit and quiet and devoid of distractions. It should not be in the lounge room with the TV going. You need to think and to focus fully on your study. Some people find background music provides a conducive atmosphere (depending on the music, of course!). On the other hand, the use of IPODS and ear plugs reduces your concentration level – it locks you in a demanding ‘unreal’ world. If a suitable place can’t be found at home see if you can use the local library.

Establish a study plan. Include the times you will work, the amount of time you will allocate to studying Art and the kind of tasks you will need to do. Big tasks should be broken down into more manageable ones. It’s useful to make a list of the things you need to do and the topics or information you need to learn.

Don't procrastinate. The longer you put off starting a study program, the more difficult it usually is to begin. This is also true once you have started a study session. If something needs to be done it's best to do it and tick it off your list.

Keep a note book into which important points can be recorded. Some of these points might be about content you need to learn, some might be about your study plans and some might be about things you need to check on or follow up, for example, with your teacher. You might allocate a colour code to each of these to make them easier to find in your notebook (e.g. a mark with different coloured highlight pens can be made in the margin).

Find out what form the examination will take. Some exams have a clearly established format that is followed each year. Find out whether you will need to write essays, reply to multiple choice options or provide short answers? Is the exam 'open' or 'closed book'? That is, can you take information into the examination or not?

Try to obtain an examination paper from the past year(s). If you are familiar with the kind of exam questions that have been used before you should not be daunted. You might find it useful to do one of the exams from previous years (your teacher may be prepared to look at your answers and provide advice). It is unlikely 2 exams will be the same. Doing a trial exam will at least give you experience in working to a set time limit and will give you practice thinking under exam conditions.

Determine what kinds of responses are required by the questions asked. This could include, for example

- writing about artworks you have seen firsthand
- comparing different artworks or artists or art movements or cultures etc.
- writing analyses or responses to artworks that are included in the exam paper
- writing about the various influences that are evident in artworks or upon artists
- making cultural connections from past and/or present contexts
- making a response to the opinions of someone else about an artwork, movement, artist or culture
- establishing an argument for or against a particular point of view
- writing about your own studio works or studio experiences.

Practice using what you learn to answer those different kinds of questions. This can be done formally in written form and/or in your mind by thinking for a while on how the information you know might be used for those different kinds of questions.

Read Exhibition Reviews by Art Critics in newspapers. Doing this informs you of some things you might easily have missed in an exhibition you attended and also helps you become accustomed to the ways language can be used when writing about Art. You could use different coloured highlight pens to mark different kinds of comments made by the critic. For example, comments that describe the objects or things that can be seen in the artworks could be highlighted

in blue; comments that describe the design or composition of the artworks could be highlighted in yellow; comments that describe meanings and messages found in the artworks could be highlighted in green; comments that describe the use of skills and techniques or working processes could be highlighted in pink and comments that make judgmental statements, such as good/bad and like/dislike could be highlighted in red. You can add additional colours if there are other kinds of comments you'd like to highlight – for example, comments about influences or statements by the artist.

Form a study support group. This can help you to stay focused. The group could sometimes study together. Sharing ideas and concerns can be helpful. Support groups can also be in contact via phone or email should that be desired. The group could actually agree to undertake its Art study at the same time and on the same night in different locations to make contact more convenient.

Take regular planned breaks. These can ensure you remain fresh and interested. Tediumness comes easily when prolonged time is committed to any one task. It has been recommended that 10 minutes be taken off for each hour of study.

Make a study timetable when exams get close. This should include all of your subjects so that all are adequately accommodated and nothing is forgotten or ignored.

Try to avoid studying the night before the exam. This is easier said than done. Hopefully, you will not need to do this because

you will have planned well in advance. Much of what you do the night before tends to be lost because you often rush because there is so much you need to learn. It is not a bad idea to quickly check off in your mind the things you know, but this should be a very short summary. Having studied seriously to a set program previously should allow you to sleep easier.

On the day of the Exam of the examination

Wake up early and quickly read or scan through your notes. This should be done quickly to check on what you have learned. While you're not likely to remember anything new, doing it will put your mind at ease, a good way to start the day.

Eat a good breakfast. You cannot work efficiently without sufficient and appropriate fuel.

Dress comfortably. If allowed to dress as you wish, always wear something you feel really good in.

Catch an earlier bus, tram or train to ensure you are not late. Being late or anxious places you under stress, and this is one time you do not want to be under stress.

Sit comfortably. If your chair or desk isn't suitable ask for another one before you start the exam. If you have time do some relaxation and breathing exercises. You will probably be bent over for a long time once the writing begins.

Place everything you need on the desk. This might include (depending on the kind of exam) your watch to easily see the time, pencil(s), spare pen, eraser, ruler, calculator, text book (if allowed) etc.

Carefully read through the exam paper and make some initial selections. Do not waste any of the free reading time. You can think of which question to answer first (the easiest questions should be answered first since they give your self-esteem and confidence a boost). You can begin planning the introduction to your first answer in your head. Any spare time can be used to begin recalling in your mind the information, such as appropriate artworks, that you will use in your answers.

Make sure you understand what the questions means. Many students write long answers that do not answer the question asked. Marks are not allocated for how much you write but for how effectively you respond to what is being asked.

Start writing immediately you are allowed. You can have the introduction to your first answer written quickly if you've already thought about it during the reading time. If you need an essay plan it should be just a list of key words to remind you of what you're going to write about, and in what order. It should never be a trial essay – you don't have time for that! There will be times when you will need to sit back and relax for a few seconds – that is when you can write your name on your exam paper.

If you panic or lose your way – put your pen down, sit back and quickly do some deep breathing exercises to help restore and re-establish your body's thinking and working processes.

Re-read your answers. It is important to check for simple spelling mistakes and grammatical errors that can be corrected quickly before you hand your finished exam in. If you realize there is something you need to correct or something you forgot that needs to be included (and you have time), it can be written in the side margin and a line can be used to show where it is to be inserted. Mistakes should not be removed using 'white out' because it takes too long to dry and sometimes you will forget to make the correction. Examiners know that if you place a line through text, you want that part to be ignored.

After the exam

Celebrate appropriately in some way your successful achievement in completing your exam(s). You should have reason to celebrate if you have taken heed of the advice above. You will certainly have given yourself the best chance to achieve highly. Undertaking demanding and challenging work, such as for an exam, can be really rewarding and exciting when you know you have prepared for the task. This is equally true for academic challenges as it is for running a marathon or undertaking some other high level activity. Acknowledging that you have done your best is well deserved and will help you in preparation for future exams and future challenges.