

Preparing for 'Open book' exams

This guide is about how to prepare for 'open book' exams. It will explain what 'open book' exams are and how they differ from traditional exams, and it will offer some practical guidance on how to make the best of your time when preparing to sit such an exam.

'Open book' exams: what are they?

An 'open book' exam is an exam in which you have access to textbooks and revision resources during the exam itself. It is therefore unlike a traditional exam in which you are not allowed to take in any of these materials. 'Open book' exams are often longer than traditional ones. This is because expectations – which we will explore in more detail below – are usually slightly different.

Expectations: how are 'open book' exams different from traditional exams?

Traditional exams test your ability to recall and apply knowledge you have picked up through the term or year of study. In using that knowledge to answer an exam question (or questions), you can demonstrate your ability to analyse and evaluate information, for example, in much the same way as you would in more routine pieces of assessed work.

In 'open book' exams, there is a greater expectation on you to make effective use of relevant knowledge and in doing so demonstrate analysis, evaluation, synthesis and an ability to make informed judgements.

Given that you have the texts and your notes in front of you, there is also a greater expectation for you to demonstrate broader understanding, to show your tutors that you have a detailed and in-depth overview of a topic rather than just one aspect of it. What is not tested is your ability simply to find relevant information and copy it out. This would be inappropriate when completing a piece of coursework or any interim assessment; equally, it will not lead to success in an 'open book' exam.

Preparing for an 'open book' exam

If there is greater expectation on you to make effective use of your texts and notes in an 'open

book' exam, how should you prepare for them? Clearly, the emphasis should be on

- i. acquiring sufficient knowledge and understanding of the information, theories, concepts, data relevant to the topic(s);
- ii. knowing where to find this information relatively quickly.

Therefore you should prepare for an 'open book' exam in exactly the same way as you would for a traditional exam: revision, targeted on areas where your knowledge is weakest; testing yourself against mock questions; looking over past exam papers to get a feel for the type of questions that have come up in previous years. Organisation is key, particularly when it comes to ensuring that you can access relevant information quickly. We suggest taking the following steps to prepare for an 'open book' exam:

1. *Check with your tutor (or on Moodle) for further details on the 'open book' exam you will be taking. The advice offered in this guide is generic; it is important for you to look for more detailed information relevant to your programme of study.
2. Find out from your tutor if there are any restrictions on the number of texts or resources you can use. Check other information; for example, are you required to include in-text references?
3. Having looked carefully at the details of the exam, identify which sources will be most useful for you in order to answer the question(s) effectively.
4. Highlight relevant sections or paragraphs using sticky colour tabs; perhaps make a list of where you might find references to specific aspects of the topic and use this list to navigate through your resources quickly and easily. Can you use post-its to map out key ideas or concepts? Try to be creative, as you would be when revising for traditional exams.

Sitting an 'open book' exam

Remember to consider (i) time – how long do you have to write your answer? (ii) quotation – avoid copying out chunks of text; and (iii) leave enough time at the end to review your work.