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Secrets Of Successfully Sitting Exams

By Anthony Keith Whitehead

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Many people work hard studying various subjects to sit for examinations in them. Fine. Hard work is usually a necessary condition for passing exams. Unfortunately it does not follow that it is a sufficient condition! Exam technique can be almost equally as important. It can make all the difference between success and failure or between poor grades and good grades.

As students, we often complain about the examination system. That is usually because we feel the pressure of an uncertain outcome. But like all systems we need to understand its mechanics in order to make it work for us.

What follows is largely concerned with exams needing written answers, rather than mathematically-based subjects.

Frustrating Examiners

This section applies as much to writing course work as to examination answers

When you consider writing essays, also consider the person who will have to read them. He/she has a psychology. Make it work for you, not against you. Most examiners do their job well and effectively but...

Exam assessors usually have a mountain of scripts to wade through. They like to get through them faster rather than slower, with relative ease rather than difficulty. When they find a script which facilitates the two former objects, they are delighted and their disposition towards the writer soars.

A great frustration is caused by having to 'dig' into the essay to discover whether or not the student has given a correct or acceptable answer. Sometimes this job is very difficult. The examiner has to re-read the essay to discover what is actually being said. Sometimes an actual decision has to be

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made by the examiner as to whether a correct answer has, in fact, been given, because the composition is so obtuse.

Some method is needed which will avoid this situation and which will improve the examiner's disposition towards the writer.

Writing Effectively

Writing effectively in exams is really not that difficult. There is a simple technique which can be used and adopted to virtually every type of question.

The technique is to divide your essay into three (unequal) parts:

1. An introduction
2. An expansion of 1;
3. A conclusion.

Numbers 1 and 3 are quite short and basically say the same thing except in rather different ways.

1. is critical and is a short version of the answer. This lets the examiner know immediately that you know what you are talking about. It requires slight differences of emphases depending on the actual wording of the question.

For example, a question which asks something like "What are the factors which influence..." needs an introductory answer which starts something like: "The factors which influence so-and-so are..." And you mention them in descending order of importance. A question of the type: "Discuss such-and-such..." needs an answer which starts something like: "When discussing such-and-such one needs to take account of..." and then mention the major points which you consider to be important and which you are going to discuss.

There may be other variations in the phrasing of the question, but the approach you adopt needs to be always the same: present the examiner with what is effectively a concise answer to the question. It usually takes no more than a few lines, maybe a dozen at most. He/she will jump up and down in excitement at having found someone who not only knows the answer but who can also actually make it explicit.

2. The expansion of the essay is simply a development to show that whatever you said at 1. is correct or relevant. This takes up most of the essay. Use a new paragraph for every new point. Don't be afraid to be pedantic. End each of these paragraphs by relating what you have said directly back to the question. e.g. "Hence it can be seen that..." and so forth.

If, during the course of writing your answer, you suddenly remember a really major point which really should have come earlier, just "knit" it in as if this is where you always intended it to go. Thus: "Of

course, a further point which needs to be given especially emphasis at this juncture is..." Try and make it seem the most natural place to put it. The examiner may think it better put elsewhere, but he will not usually penalise you for that

3. The conclusion will be little more than a restatement of the introduction – but you do need a conclusion. During the writing of the essay you may have thought of some other points not mentioned in the introduction. If so, be sure to mention them in the conclusion.

Read Before You Write

Always spend at least six/seven minutes out of a three hours exam reading the question paper. Read it three times. The first to get a general impression. The second to mark any question which you can reasonably attempt. The third to check that your second reading decisions were accurate – sometimes, in the face of nervous tension, they are not. This is time well spent. As an invigilator, one often groans within at seeing student grabbing their pens and beginning to write before the clock has stopped chiming the hour to commence!

Dividing Time

Unless some questions have unequal shares in the total marks possible, always divide your time equally between the questions. There are severe diminishing returns to each extra minute spent on the present question – more could be added to the overall total by going onto the next.

Conclusions

As already said, don't throw away your hard work during the year through bad or none existent exam technique. With good technique it is, in fact, possible to do rather well with skimpy knowledge (although one does not advocate the practice!), whereas it is commonplace for students to underachieve by neglecting their technique.

A K Whitehead

Web Site:

The author has had many years experience in setting examining, marking and invigilating examinations and has used the above technique to considerable personal benefit.

How To Make Self Tuition Successful

By A K Whitehead

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Is it possible to study successfully on one's own? Certainly. Being taught something by someone else is usually the easiest way of learning

but if, for whatever reason, that is not possible or just difficult, self tuition is a means to the same end that can be made to work for you.

There are four principles which one needs to remember to be successful: STRATEGY, MOTIVATION, APPLICATION and PERSISTENCE. These, in fact, are not too different from the requirements for success in any form of study. But their essentialities are all tightened up in achieving goals in self study.

STRATEGY

A carefully devised strategy before considering anything else will pay great dividends later. So undertake it carefully at the start.

One needs to be clear about the ultimate objective. Ask yourself : where I want to finish up? What are the essential stages in getting? How do I keep my options open in case I need to make a change of direction or objective later on?

Most strategies in education and training will involve sitting and passing examinations. Make sure at the outset what the exact requirements are. Approach the organising body and get all the information you can. The same advice really applies also to examinations run by any official body which will validate your qualifications.

Setting Your Pace

This is where the self-tuition student can score an advantage. You are not constrained by the set progress of tuition classes. You can go faster or slower according to your own preferences and the date the examining body sets for its exams. But be honest with yourself in setting these time objectives.

Exam Strategy

An examination system sets (usually) rigid frameworks within which you must operate. Try to make them work for you. For example, exams often have elements of predictability. The subject areas are fixed and the syllabus is known in advance. The areas for exam questions can often be predicted from a study of past papers. Get

hold of as many as you can and spend time studying them – just as important as studying your subject!

Programme Of Study

Buy whatever books are recommended for each subject. Don't skimp on this because they take the place of the teacher/lecturer and are essential.

Look at the number of areas within each subject. Compare these to (a) those which have come up most regularly in past exam papers. Then set out a programme for covering the areas you have selected for study. This programme **must** be completed well in advance of the date of the exams to allow time for revision. As a general guide, allow about two months to revise a subject.

Do not let the subjects become boring. Find ways to stimulate your interest, to break down and attack the subject matter. Simply reading is difficult when trying to maintain concentration.

Try making concise notes of chapters and sections within them. Or use a text highlighter to pass over important passages – but don't use yellow because it fades too quickly and is difficult to see in some lights. Also, do not use a colour you dislike.

APPLICATION

You may have seen or heard of the film *The Loneliness Of The Long Distance Runner*. That is what you are! And that is what self tuition is like: a lonely activity. All study is ultimately the same, but in your case even more so.

You need to give priority to your objective or, unless you are exceptionally intelligent and capable, you are likely not to succeed. Always remind yourself of your ultimate objective

PERSISTENCE

So keep the *winning post* always in view – and remind yourself frequently of where you are heading and what you are going to achieve. Whatever it is you want the exams for, keep that as your motivator – and keep applying yourself to that objective. Get used to the loneliness and even find enjoyment in it. This is just part of finding within yourself the quality of persistence.

Remember that exams are not the *winning post* and is **not** the ultimate objective. Exams are only a means to an end. It is whatever you want the exams for that is your ultimate motivator. Persistence in pursuing that is what will lead to success.

870 Words

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