

EXAMINATION STRATEGIES



People tend to believe that if you are intelligent or smart, you will automatically/definitely achieve high examination marks.

However, you can have smart students performing badly and weak to average students obtaining the higher scores, which is something we find that happens quite often in the real world.

Intelligence \neq Great Exam Results

Likewise, the degree to which a student knows his/her work does not always translate into higher test/examination scores.

Knowledge \neq Great Exam Results

Some students just cope better under examination conditions than others. Some make careless mistakes or suffer mental blanks when exposed to examination strain. Other reasons why students perform to a lower standard than expected include:

- Rushing through the paper.
- Not checking answers.
- Not concentrating.
- Misinterpreting key words.
- Skipping calculations.
- Performing calculations in their head.
- Little confidence in their ability.
- Insufficient time.
- Panic attacks and mind blanks.

Like many things in life, examination performance can be described by a mathematical equation:

DURING THE WEEKS LEADING UP TO THE EXAMS

1. Learn materials thoroughly so that you feel confident when you walk into the exams.

If you know your work well, you'll be less likely to become anxious, or to develop a mind blank in the exam. Reassure yourself of this fact on a regular basis throughout the year.

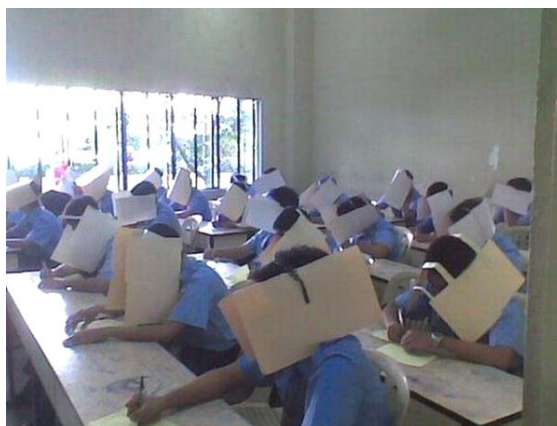
Regarding calculation oriented subjects (particularly mathematics): Aim for deep understanding rather than 'recipe learning'.

2. Don't base all of your studies on what has appeared in past examinations. Exam writers regularly change the focus of exam papers, so learn everything that could be examined. Do, however, use past examination papers to gain an insight into which sections of the course are more commonly examined and that may require additional attention or higher priority.
3. Familiarise yourself with any patterns in past examination papers. Is there a recurrent theme in question styles or the topics that are being examined? If patterns do exist, use this information to determine the order in which topics should be reviewed/re-learned.
4. If you're struggling with time and need to cut back on how much you are learning, base your studies on the past 5 VCE papers. You'll notice that there are recurring themes each year. Base your studies on these topics.
5. Revise the previous year's materials. Year 11 coursework can, and has been previously examined in the final VCE examinations.
6. When you are working through past papers or examination-style questions, think about every step you are doing and why you are doing that particular step. This will help to develop analysis/application skills and hopefully reduce the number of careless mistakes that are made under examination conditions.
7. Learn the common mistakes made by past students and how to avoid these. These errors are regularly tested in the exams.
8. Put aside enough time to read through the Assessment Reports, as they include invaluable, detailed comments from the assessors who marked the papers, including common errors, methods of solution which were successful in gaining full marks, and examples of how those who couldn't complete an entire question still gained part marks. These documents may be downloaded from:

www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/vce/exams/examsassessreports.html
9. During the week before your exams, sit two exam papers under examination conditions. This will help you determine the pace you need to adopt, so you're able to complete the paper within the available time.
10. If you're prone to anxiety, regularly practise the actions that you'll be required to perform in an exam.

11. During the days leading up to an exam, **DO NOT** attempt questions that aren't accompanied by fully worked solutions. You're likely to panic if you get a question incorrect and you're unable to work out why, decreasing your ability to learn and to apply information effectively.

DURING EACH EXAMINATION

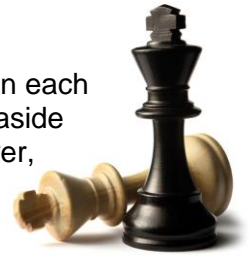


1. Take your watch off and place it in-front of you so that you can monitor the time.
2. Ensure that you write your student number and any relevant information that is required on the cover of the examination paper/answer booklets/multiple choice answer sheets.
3. Check that every page of the examination paper is present. Also check to see what is on the back page.
4. Read through as much of the paper during the allocated reading time. Identify those questions which are difficult, frightening or time consuming. Leave these questions until last.
5. Make sure you understand what questions you're required to answer. Is there a choice of questions to answer or do you need to answer every question?
6. Keep your work neat as good presentation earns better marks.

Correct spelling, punctuation, neat handwriting, accurate and clear working of mathematical calculations, clearly labelled diagrams (diagrams should be at least one third of a page in size), starting each question on a new page (if it is realistic to do so), clearly indicating the question number on top of each page all serve to make the marker's task easier, and protect against possible loss in marks. If the markers cannot read your response, they cannot award you marks!

7. Spread your work out so that it is easy to follow.
8. Use ink based writing implements where possible (or allowed). This will ensure that the markers will not suffer from eye stress when marking your papers (and this of course makes them less cranky). **Use a pencil to draw graphs.**

9. In general – If your examination paper consists of both multiple choice and short answer/extended response questions – leave the multiple choice questions to last. There are usually more marks awarded for the time and effort spent addressing short answer/extended response questions.
10. Before starting a paper, determine the **maximum time** that should be spent on each question, by dividing the total number of marks by the time available. But put aside 10 minutes to “check and guess” towards the end of the exam. Do not, however, work through an examination paper in accordance with the maximum times.
11. Work through each examination paper in accordance with pace – not time. As an example:



Identify which questions/parts are easy, of average difficulty or hard.

Work through as many of the “easy” questions as possible. As soon as you notice that you are slowing down, move to the next “easy” question or part.

Once you have completed as much of the paper at the faster pace, go back and work through the questions that are “average” in difficulty. When you notice that you are once again slowing down, move to the next “average” question or part.

Once you have completed as much of the paper at the average pace, go back and work through the “hard” questions. Move to the next difficult question/part when you notice that the pace at which you are working has slowed down.



Question & Difficulty	Typical Student			Smart Student		
	Order	Time	Marks	Order	Time	Marks
Q1 = 5 Marks = Easy						
Q2 = 5 Marks = Easy						
Q3 = 5 Marks = Average						
Q4 = 5 Marks = Hard						
Q5 = 5 Marks = Average						
Q6 = 5 Marks = Easy						
Total Marks						

12. Do **NOT** panic if you don't understand an extended response or a long text-based question after reading it for the first time. You may need to read through these types of questions a few times before you have a good understanding of the given scenario and what answers you're required to provide. Assist in the understanding process by engaging in self-talk and visualisation.
13. If you suffer a "mental blank" or aren't sure how to answer a particular question, mark it and move onto something easier (this will boost your confidence and reduce the panic attack that has probably started).
14. Mark the questions you skip as easy (E), average (A) or hard (H).
15. Whilst addressing other questions, look at the techniques being used as well as the given formula sheet to give you possible ideas as to how to address the question(s) you have skipped.
16. Once you have completed the remainder of the paper – go back and make another attempt at the questions you skipped. If you still cannot answer a question and you have completed as much of the paper as you can, prepare a flow diagram that outlines how you would have tackled the question if you could do it or if you had more time.
17. Don't waste valuable time rewriting questions. The markers know what the question is about, and there are never any marks available for re-writing instructions.
18. Use the number of allocated marks to determine the level of detail required in your answers. For example:

A 4 mark question in a mathematics exam will most likely require the equations relating to 3 major steps as well as the answer.

A 2 mark question in Chemistry will most likely require 2 significant statements/points.
19. Include **brief** statements that indicate what method/solution process you are applying. If your answer is a complete mess – but your approach is correct, you could be awarded consequential marks. For example:

For max/min, let $\frac{dy}{dx} = 0$.
20. Always choose the simplest and quickest method.
21. Even though first answers are often correct, don't be afraid to change your original answer if, upon reflection, it seems wrong to you. Dozens of studies over the past 70 years have found that students who change dubious answers usually improve their exam marks. For example, in 2005, a study of 1,561 exams found that when students changed their answers, they went from wrong to right 51% of the time, right to wrong 25% of the time, and wrong to a different wrong answer 23% of the time (Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Vol. 88, 725-735).
22. **TAKE HEED** of verbs in the given instructions (eg. evaluate, calculate, prove, show, hence etc) making sure that you address the correct requirements in relation to your subject.

23. When tackling worded questions, visualise the scenario or insert yourself into the given situation so that it becomes easier to understand what is happening and what may be required of you.
24. Sketch diagrams or pictures to help visualise what is going on. A picture does tell a thousand words! You will find that in many questions, once you transfer all the given data to a diagram, the requirements of the question become much clearer and much easier to address.
25. Rewrite worded questions in the following format:

Find x when $y = 5$

26. Highlight or circle the answers in multi-part or linked questions. This will decrease the time you need to spend looking for answers when answering subsequent parts.

$$\begin{aligned} \frac{dg}{dt} &= (t-1)^2 \times -e^{-t} + e^{-t} \times 2(t-1) \\ &= -e^{-t}(t^2-2t+1) + 2e^{-t}(t-1) \\ &= e^{-t}[2(t-1) - (t^2-2t+1)] \\ &= e^{-t}(2t-2-t^2+2t-1) \\ &= e^{-t}(-t^2+4t-3) \\ \therefore b &= 4 \quad c = -3 \\ &= e^{-t}[2(t-1) - (t^2-2t+1)] \\ &= e^{-t}(2t-2-t^2+2t-1) \\ &= e^{-t}(-t^2+4t-3) \end{aligned}$$



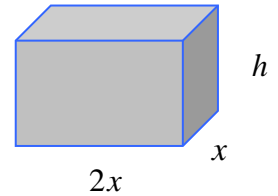
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27. Never leave a question unanswered (unless you're penalised for incorrect answers and/or you have run out of time). Leave these questions until last, and if time permits, write down anything relating to the question. You may be lucky and secure one or two marks!!
28. Information in the earlier parts of a question are often required for subsequent parts.
So what do you do if you cannot answer an earlier part of a question?
Make up an answer and use it for the remainder of the paper. You may be awarded consequential/partial marks if you answer the remainder of the question correctly. Note that you won't be awarded full marks.
29. Never scrub out incorrect responses. Just insert a neat line through your workings and write what you believe to be correct underneath. Even if you are wrong, but there is merit in your thinking, you could score 1 or 2 marks.

30. Re-read every question before you move onto the next one to ensure that all components (and/or the correct components) have been answered.

For example: A rectangular block, the length of whose base is twice the width, has a total surface area of 300 cm^2 . Find the height of the block if it is of maximum volume.



Answer

Find the value of h **not** x !

31. Marks are often lost due to the failure of addressing key instructions eg. Not stating answers to the correct number of decimal places or using exact values. Underline key words and instructions as they appear.
32. Marks are also frequently lost due to transcription errors i.e. Copying data from the given information incorrectly. Be careful!!!
33. Avoid using abbreviations in the exams unless you are absolutely sure as to what is acceptable.
34. Read questions carefully to ensure that you are clear as to how answers should be presented. For example, when given a time question, should the answer be expressed in hours or as an actual time?
35. Include the appropriate units in your answers, even they aren't specifically requested.
36. Always check questions to see if units have changed or are different from the typical units employed. Exam writers love to try and trick students with units.
- For example, time can be defined as minutes at the beginning of a question and a later part could ask you to solve the equation at 2 hours.
37. Check answers by finding an estimate or by substituting random numbers into the equation to obtain an approximate.
38. When answering calculation-style questions, cross check answers against the given domain or physical constraints to make sure they are valid.
39. Make sure that your answers are relevant and that you do not stray off onto tangents. Remember to use key words related to the topic in your answer.

40. **Assume nothing!**

Never assume something is true unless it's otherwise stated, or you've been given information on a diagram which supports your assumption. For example, do not assume a triangle is right-angled or that a sequence is arithmetic just because it looks like it might be.

41. If you finish the exam early, do not leave! Use the spare time to double check answers and to work through the questions that you skipped or were unsure of.

ENGLISH AND RELATED SUBJECTS

Me fail English?
That's impossible.

1. If you are required to provide essay style answers, spend the first 5 minutes jotting down ideas and placing them in a logical order before writing your essay.
2. Make sure your essay answers the question as it's put, not as you would like it to have been phrased. Also ensure that you have a clear introduction, a consistent line of reasoning supported by specific evidence, examples and models, that you evaluate opposing viewpoints and that you finish with a conclusion that follows logically from your argument.
3. Don't be tempted to spend more time than you have allowed on a single question.

The law of diminishing returns states that if you spend twice as long on an essay you will not get twice the marks for it! It's better to provide reasonable answers to all the questions required rather than a brilliant answer for one and nothing for another.

