

Exam Strategies

“The purpose of an exam or test is to provide a fair assessment of students’ memory, level of knowledge, understanding, and ability to analyze, synthesize, assimilate data, etc. at a particular time or point in a course.” — Roger Prior

There are a number of exam-writing strategies that can be practiced to ensure that exam results are a true reflection of how you are doing (or did) in a course. It is one thing to know there are strategies, but another to actually practice them. The old adage is true: practice makes perfect.

1. KNOW YOUR EXAM AHEAD OF TIME

There should be no real surprises on any exam. You should be able to find out exactly what the exam covers. In biology, this could be the chapters, concepts, or learning outcomes. The number of each type of question is worth finding out as well. When in doubt, ask your teacher. The various types of questions may require different types of thinking and different intellectual skills.

2. BE PREPARED TO WRITE A GOOD EXAM

Given that you can find out about the nature of the exam, you should be able to prepare for it in a number of ways.

Physical Preparations

Be punctual — don’t rush around prior to the exam. Give yourself ample time to get there, but don’t be too early. Too little or too much time may only build anxiety.

Be comfortable — be sure to eat normal meals during exam schedules. You don’t want to be hungry or physically uncomfortable because you ate too much (or too spicy) food. Go to the bathroom well before the exam.

Be rested — get a good couple of nights’ sleep before an exam. Being over-tired may only add to the anxiety. (But don’t sleep at the expense of studying.)

Intellectual Preparations

Be ready for the exam — see Study Tips.

Emotional Preparations

Be focused — keep your mind set on the exam. Don’t spend a lot of time hanging around with others prior to the exam. This will usually build anxiety (the “safety in numbers” syndrome). Know what you are doing. Attack the exam wisely. Read all instructions, and look over the entire exam before starting. Budget your time.

Maintain the right attitude — avoid becoming anxious about the exam or certain questions on the exam (see below). Don’t let the exam beat you.

3. WRITING THE EXAM

A. It can’t be stressed enough that you should maintain your emotional preparation throughout the entire exam. Try to eliminate the variables that you could find bothersome or distracting, such as sitting by a window or in the back of a room where there are rows of others to watch. If seats are assigned, there may be little you can do about this.

B. Once you get your exam paper and are allowed to write on it, jot down the little memory acronyms etc. that you are trying hard not to forget. Clear them out of your mind so you can maintain a clear focus on the exam.

C. Look over the whole exam before you start. Make sure it is complete (no missing pages etc). Get a rough

idea of what you are up against. Read over instructions. Seek clarification for ambiguities.

D. Take a minute to plan your time: If there are multiple-choice questions, how long should you spend on them? how about the written answer sections? and so on. The Biology 12 Provincial Exam has 67 multiple choice questions and 23 marks' worth of written answer questions. The recommended maximum time for each of these sections is 80 and 40 minutes respectively (for a two-hour total). This is about a minute per multiple-choice question. Ensure that you plan time to check over the paper and your answers at the end.

E. You should start the exam where you are comfortable. If you do well with written answers, start there. Starting with something that you are comfortable with will help diffuse tension. If you encounter a tough or confusing question, leave it out and return to it. There may be something else on the exam that jars your memory, so you are able to answer it later. A hint about answering well-written knowledge level multiple-choice questions (approx. 12 on the Provincial): cover the choices and read the stem only. Determine an answer and check the choices to see if it is there. If your answer is one of the choices, you are probably correct.

F. If you encounter a question that you don't know the answer to, perhaps it is not a knowledge level question and requires a different thought process to arrive at the correct answer. If you have practiced some of these properly, you will recognize them when you see them.

G. Employ different types of reasoning; they may be required to arrive at a good answer for all questions. Work the test, and make it work for you. If you are left having to guess, go with your first impression. Second-guessing is usually less accurate.

H. If you don't know a full answer in a written answer question, write down the portion that you know. Part marks are better than no marks.

I. One last word: don't over- or under-think the questions. The questions are based on the content prescribed. The answer can be derived from the course somewhere. Make sure you are answering the question that was intended.