

OPEN BOOK EXAMS

A GUIDE FOR STUDENTS

WHAT ARE OPEN BOOK EXAMS?



An Open book exam (OBE) allows you to take notes, texts or resource materials into an exam situation (e.g. at home). They require you to:

- learn for understanding rather than just remembering
- understand how to find information
- make good notes and organise materials for fast reference
- apply the information in your sources to the questions.

What kind of resources can be used?

Resources are usually unrestricted and might include:

- your own notes
- readings, reference materials or textbooks
- equipment like calculators, drafting tools etc.



Check with your lecturer to find out what you can use. The main restriction for OBEs is that they must be your work—you must attempt them by yourself without any help from others.

What kind of questions will an open book exam have?

Open-book exams don't test your memory; they test your ability to find and use information for problem solving, and to deliver well-structured and well-presented arguments and solutions.

Open-book exam questions usually require you to apply knowledge, and they may be essay-style questions or involve problem solving or delivering solutions. The style of question depends on the department setting the exam. For example, in Entrepreneurship, the questions may devise a hypothetical case study that you will need to discuss and provide solutions for.

PREPARATION



Study

You need to study for open-book exams just as you would for any exam. If you know your subject, you'll have a knowledge base to draw on. You will also understand how and why topics are linked.

Plan ahead

Carefully select your readings, notes and resources and organise them neatly together beforehand. Set up a quiet space where you can concentrate and complete the exam without interruptions.

Find out the exam requirements

- the exact time and date of the exam
- how the exam can be taken – handwritten or through Moodle
- how much time you have to complete the exam?
- the topic areas the exam will cover
- how long answers should be
- whether you need to reference
- the types of questions, essays, short answers, etc. – there may be a combination



Make some useful notes for yourself

- Review the subject to get a good overview
- Work out the main themes and topics
- Identify key concepts or information
- Make brief and legible notes
- Summarise important information
- Use clear headings.
- Organise notes by topic
- Identify how topics are connected

PREPARATION



Before the exam

- Make sure you organise your notes so you can find information quickly
- Use tables of contents and index pages to locate relevant sections in the books you plan to use.
- Bookmark useful chapters or pages. Post-it notes can be helpful here.
- Prepare brief summaries, e.g. in margins of texts to provide a quick reference.
- Prepare a list of key information (formulae, key definitions etc.) likely to be used.

On the day

- Don't panic
- Only have the resources you really need – don't overcrowd your space
- Eat something.
- Be ready in plenty of time
- Read all the exam questions carefully
- Start with the easy ones
- Use quotations sparingly
- Reference as you would for any written examination
- Be aware of the time
- Leave enough time to submit

How will you deter cheating?

In an open-book exam, you must submit your own work, without any help from others. When you take an exam, you will be required to confirm that this is your own work. Plagiarism software Turnitin may be used. The lecturer may also conduct follow-up viva voce exams (student interviews) to check your understanding of the examined material.



MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT OPEN BOOK EXAMS



Open-book exams are easy: Open-book exams are not an easy option. Answering the questions well requires more than just copying information straight from texts. In open-book exams, it's how you locate, apply and use the information that is important.

You don't have to study: This is probably the biggest misconception. Having books and notes to refer to might mean you don't have to memorise as much information, but you still need to be able to apply it effectively.

This means you must fully understand and be familiar with the content and materials of your course so you can find and use the appropriate information. In open-book exams, you need to quickly find the relevant information in the resources you have. If you don't study, you won't know where to find the information.

You can just copy straight from the book!: You can't copy chunks of text directly from textbooks or notes. This is plagiarism. In open-book exams, the resource materials are made available to you, so you are expected to do more than just reproduce them. You must be able to find, interpret and apply the information in your sources to the exam questions. You usually need to reference as well, just as you would for any other assignment.

The more materials the better!: Only have what you need. Stacks of books won't necessarily guarantee your performance, and you won't have time for extensive reading. Too many materials can end up distracting you and crowding up your workspace. Carefully select your materials and organise them for quick reference.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES



University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia (2019) “Tips for sitting an open book exam”, Accessed 02/04/2020, Available at <https://student.unsw.edu.au/preparing-open-book-exams>

University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia (2019) “Tips for sitting an open book exam”, Accessed 02/04/2020, Available at <https://student.unsw.edu.au/tips-sitting-exam>

University of Oxford “What is an open book exam and what does it mean for me?”, (2020) Accessed 03/04/2020, Available at <https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/exams/open-book?wssl=1>