Module P: Exam Writing

Even if you have prepared diligently, problems may arise in the exam setting itself that will result in your mark not reflecting accurately your level of achievement. Occasionally you may write an exam on which you do badly through no fault of your own: for example, your class did not prepare you properly to answer the questions, or the questions were badly composed or were otherwise inappropriate. If you believe that your exam was unfair, consult with other students, and if many of them concur, discuss the concern with your professor. Be aware that the university has procedures for students to make formal appeals in situations such as this.

Most of the time, however, you will have some control over the problems that occur in the exam setting, that reduce your grade. Review the Learning Skills Handout, "Tips for Exam Preparation and Exam Writing." This module will deal with the following two issues:

1. misinterpreting the requirements of an exam question
2. getting too anxious in the exam

Misinterpreting the Requirements of an Exam Question.

This is a serious problem. How do we learn to pay attention to cues that we don’t pay attention to – particularly when the only chance we get to practice is when we can’t afford to be practicing, because we are working for marks?

Essay Questions

Plan ahead – read the question slowly and carefully, looking at every word. Often we misinterpret exam questions because they are more complex than we expect. This observation applies particularly to essay questions. Number each thing that is required to be included in the answer. Plan how you will respond, by doing a mind map of what you will include.

Look back at what is required, and mark your map with numbers corresponding to those requirements. Have you left anything out?

Organize the material in your map and write your essay, crossing off each item on the map as you include it in the essay. Review the Learning Skills Handouts, “The Writing of a History Essay Examination,” “Simplified Plans of Action for Common Types of Question Words,” and “Answering Essay Questions.”

Multiple Choice Questions

Some exam questions are written in such a difficult way that they test your ability to decipher directions as much as they test your knowledge of the course. Multiple choice questions as well as essay questions can be very difficult to answer for this reason. Review the Learning Skills Handouts, “The Multiple Choice Exam,” and “Sociology: Patterns of Family Organization - Six Types of Test Questions.”

Getting Too Anxious in the Exam

Our position on anxiety is that it is generally justified. A certain level of anxiety is appropriate to the exam situation. This level of anxiety will likely increase to the degree that you are not prepared. From a Learning Skills point of view, the solution is to be prepared. Remember, YOU CAN BE ANXIOUS AND STILL DO A GOOD JOB. However, a high level of anxiety – bordering on panic – may be a detriment, because one’s blood will move from the extremities, including the head, to the trunk, resulting in cold, clammy hands, and an inability to think clearly.

An appropriate way to prepare for exams, that also can reduce anxiety, is to prepare under the same conditions as those that will be in place when you are tested, applying time constraints to yourself, and not allowing yourself to look at any notes or your text as you are studying. Practice answering the same types of questions as will be on the exam (review Modules 1, What’s Important to Learn?) You may even want to practice in a classroom, to make the situation more realistic.

Some people experience an escalating spiral of anxiety: they notice that they are anxious about the test, and then they become anxious about being anxious, because they believe that being anxious will reduce their performance on the test (which may be true in extreme cases); so that their anxiety is immediately increased, because they have two things to be anxious about, and the more anxious they are, the more anxious they become. You can’t fight anxiety with anxiety. An effective solution to this problem is to acknowledge your anxious thoughts as thoughts, rather than as facts; so instead of saying, "I fall apart in exams," say, "I am thinking that I fall apart in exams." This will serve to distance the reaction and allow you to challenge it by
supplanting this response with others, such as, “I can still write this exam effectively even though I am anxious, because I know the material”; or “I am wasting time thinking about being anxious – I will get to work now and answer as many questions as I can.”

You may find it useful to have a variety of stress-reduction techniques that you can apply consciously, such as taking a deep breath, stretching, consciously relaxing tense muscles, and so on. Come to a Counselling Services Stress Reduction workshop or borrow one of our audio tapes on relaxation, practice relaxing with a biofeedback mechanism, or make an individual appointment with a Learning Skills counsellor.

Task 1 (Review Your Exam)

To improve your exam writing skills, it is important, as with any other learning task, to “debrief” after the learning activity.

1. Did you deliberately apply any strategies during the exam, to help you manage your time, reduce stress, answer questions, review, etc.? Did these strategies work? Could you modify them to make them more effective?

2. Go over the marked exam carefully, looking for patterns in your successes and errors – did you target the content accurately? Did you prepare effectively for the types of questions? Were there particular types of problems you did poorly on? If you missed anything important, analyze what happened that resulted in your being unprepared, and develop a strategy to rectify the problem in the future.

Task Summary

1. Review the following Learning Skills Handouts, as appropriate:
   - “Strategies for Reading Exam Questions”
   - “Answering Essay Questions”
   - “The Multiple Choice Exam”
   - “The Writing of a History Essay Examination”

2. After your exam is marked, bring it in to review with your Learning Skills Counsellor.