

# Open-book exams

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## What is an open-book exam?

An open-book exam allows you to refer to your notes and other course materials while you are taking the exam. Open-book exams are designed to test your ability to analyse, evaluate or synthesise knowledge, rather than your ability to recall facts or information.

As part of your programme's assessment, you may be required to complete remote open-book exams in a specified time period, working on your own without help from anyone else.

## Which course materials can I use?

During a remote, open-book exam, you are entitled to use all your lecture notes, your revision notes, books and journal articles, as well as equipment such as calculators. This doesn't mean you should use all of these resources. You will need to select carefully the materials that will be of most use. You may, of course, choose not to use any such external resources or to limit your use to particular purposes.

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## Common misconceptions



### “Open-book exams are easier”

Open-book exams are not an easy option; in fact, they should be just as challenging albeit in a different way. Answering a question well will require you to apply your knowledge and understanding, and to critically evaluate information and ideas. Less emphasis is placed on memory and knowledge recollection, and more emphasis is placed on the application of knowledge and skills.



### “You don’t have to revise for open-book exams”

You need to do as much work for an open-book exam as you would for any other exam, so you do need to revise. Having books and notes to refer to might mean you don't have to memorise as much information, but you will need to understand course content and materials and be able to apply this understanding to the questions asked. Effective revision will help to familiarise you with course materials and enable you to locate information quickly when needed.

It can also be very difficult to search quickly for the right information across textbooks and other sources, in a short time period. Careful and detailed revision avoids this scenario. Remember too that many exams test your analytical ability, as well as your ability to describe or recount information from the module. This ability to analyse ideas and explain their implications is often not replicated in books or other sources. Neither is ‘synthesis’ – the ability to pull together ideas from different sources and explain how they connect, support or refute one another. Both analytical and synthesis skills help to improve the quality of your work. Revising, for example, by practising sample exam questions, can help you build these valuable skills.



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### “You can just copy from the book”

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As with any other assessments, you must not copy and paste information straight from sources such as websites or textbooks without appropriate acknowledgement or referencing; this is plagiarism and you will be penalised for it. Re-submitting or re-using your own work from another assignment, whether this was submitted at the University of Exeter or any other academic institution worldwide, is also plagiarism (self-plagiarism). Similarly, you must not ask anyone else to help you with your exam (collusion); you are expected to do your own work and abide by the University’s Code of academic conduct and practice. You will be expected to do more than reproduce content from your textbooks and lecture slides: you will need to interpret and apply the information in your sources in order to answer the questions. You may have to reference as well, just as you would for any other assignment, so check the referencing requirements of your exams with module staff. The University uses plagiarism detection software to identify instances of academic misconduct and plagiarism.



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### “I will need to use all my course materials”

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Only use what you need. Too many materials can distract you and crowd your workspace. You should select your key resources carefully and organise them so that you can locate information quickly and easily. Although your source material will help you to respond to questions, the emphasis of the exam will be on your understanding, not on the reference materials you choose to use.

# How do I prepare for a remote open-book exam?

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## Revise

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You need to revise just as you would for any other exam, with the emphasis on understanding your course content and materials as well as learning facts. Use past papers, where available and still applicable, and/or questions from formative tests and quizzes, module workshops, seminars or revision sessions where appropriate.

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## Organise your notes

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For open-book exams you may need to spend a little more time preparing and organising your notes and other reference materials.

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## Practise

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Test yourself in 'open-book exam conditions' using past exam papers, where available and still applicable, and/or questions from formative tests and quizzes, module workshops, seminars, or revision sessions where appropriate. Even if past papers are from a prior 'closed book' exam, it will help to get used to finding and applying material from a range of sources, to respond to set questions on module content. Where there are no past papers, you can test yourself in 'open-book exam conditions' using sample questions on ELE.

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## Be informed

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Make sure you know:

- The time and date of the exam
- How much time you will have to complete the exam
- How you submit your completed exam
- Which topics will be covered
- How long your answers should be
- Whether you need to reference and, if so, in which style
- What type of questions will be asked (essay, short answer, etc.)
- Where you can access past papers or other types of practice questions

## Preparing notes and materials

Be organised. You'll work most effectively if you have selected just a few pages of notes and two or three well-chosen texts.

Prepare your notes carefully:

- Work out the main themes and topics
- Identify key concepts or information
- Make sure your notes are brief and legible
- Organise notes by topic and use clear headings
- Identify how topics are connected

Prepare your chosen texts:

- Bookmark useful chapters or pages using Post-It notes or a digital equivalent
- Prepare brief summaries, e.g. in the margins of texts to provide a quick reference.

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## Sitting a remote open-book exam

- Organise your work space so that it is comfortable and uncluttered.
- Make sure your laptop or PC is fully charged and plugged into the mains.
- Ask others not to use the internet / live-stream while you are working online.
- Only have the notes and materials that you really need. Keep these next to you so that you can access them quickly and easily.
- Make sure the rest of your household knows that you cannot be disturbed. Put a note on the door to remind everyone. If you have children, try to arrange for them to be looked after by another member of the household.
- Make sure that you've eaten before you start, and have healthy snacks and water available while you are working.
- Ensure that you know how long you have to complete the exam, and what you need to have submitted within the time frame.
- If you have a full 24 hours to complete your exam, it isn't expected that you will take all day to complete it. The exam may have been designed to be sat within a particular duration and the questions will reflect that. You do, however, have the flexibility to take rest breaks as needed.
- Don't be tempted to write too much. A concise and well-considered answer that uses supporting evidence effectively is better than a rambling, unfocussed response. If maximum word limits have been stipulated, please stick to them.

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