

Open Book Exam Tips

What should I expect?

- The instructor knows that you have your notes and text right in front of you, so is unlikely to ask questions that just call on you to copy information.
- Instead, open book exams tend to ask students to apply, analyze, synthesize, compare/contrast or evaluate¹ information. They test whether you understand the “big picture” of the course and how course concepts work together.
- For example, you might be given a problem or a scenario and asked to apply concepts from several parts of the course to it to develop an answer.
- The instructor will be looking for well-structured and presented arguments or solutions.
- The exam is likely to be more challenging than others, and the instructor is likely to have higher expectations for the quality of your answers and the extent of your critical and analytical thinking, knowing you have course materials available to draw upon.

References: [Simon Fraser University](#)

How should I prepare?

- Taking extensive notes, books and other reference materials to an open book exam is rarely beneficial, in fact, in most cases it will hinder performance. Your reference materials should be exactly that, "reference" materials. Make sure all reference materials you bring to the exam are organized and that you know ahead of time exactly where all information is that you may need to assist you in answering questions. Carefully select what you bring to the exam. It may even be useful to create an outline of your reference materials so that you can quickly find important information once the test has begun.
- In preparation for your open book test, identify key concepts and terms which will more than likely appear on the test. Use your class lecture notes to pinpoint what the instructor is likely to include on the exam. After you've done this, locate where this information is covered in the book you're permitted to use for the test or in your notes. **Once you've begun your test, with respect to your reference materials, your main concern is locating information, not studying it. You should come to the test already having studied all key concepts and topics.**
- If it's permitted, highlight sections of the book where important subjects are covered. Also, write notes in the book's margins to utilize during the test. **It is also useful to place post-it notes with important information in key sections of the book for easy accessibility during the test. In the case of open book math and science exams, list out important data and formulas separately for easy access during the test.**
- 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.
- Use index cards to list key topics and relevant page numbers of texts. Use one card per book. This can help you find information quickly.
- If you can, **highlight relevant quotes and definitions** so that they're easy to find. Place sticky notes at the front of each chapter so you can find them easily. On the sticky notes, write a very brief summary of the main ideas presented (preferably with page numbers attached to them) so you can find exactly what you're looking for during the test.
- **Create a page of formulae or important definitions.** You don't want to have to hunt around for these during the test!
- **Gather any practice exams or past quizzes and tests you've taken**, if you're allowed to bring them. You never know if a similar question might appear on the open book exam.
- Learn where all the relevant material is in the book. Put sticky notes in chapters to mark where example problems are. Also be sure to work some example problems to make sure you know how to do them, with the book open. Remember the index in the back of the book is your friend. Be familiar with that.

References: [UNSW Sydney](#), [College Info Geek](#), [Quora](#), [Education Corner](#)

How should I manage my time?

- The same time management rules that apply to general test taking also apply to taking open book tests. First, at the offset of the test review how many questions there are and determine how much time you can spend on each question. Then answer the questions you are familiar with before answering those that are more difficult or will require using your reference materials. Finally, don't over answer questions. Be concise, accurate, yet thorough. This will make it possible to complete the open book test on time and achieve a higher score.
- The first thing you should do as soon as you get the test is to go through the entire thing and answer all the questions you know off the top of your head. Look for things like important dates, facts, easy problems, and short summaries of information. If you can answer it right away without thinking too hard, do it now. Once you're done, move on to the trickier stuff. Keep aware of your time, but don't stress. Try not to over-answer or spend too much time on any one question. Answer methodically.
- Decide what you are going to bring in.
- Tab and label any tables of contents or indexes of books.
- Prepare a condensed set of notes, or summary of the course.
- Include page references for where you can find the "long version".
- Include notes or concept maps showing the relationships or connections between different concepts and parts of the course.
- If formulae will be part of your exam, put these in a separate, easily accessed place.

References: [College Info Geek](#)

What else?

- 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.
- Learn your material as thoroughly as you would for any other exam.
- Do not count on having time to look up all your answers.
- Organize your resources so that you can find the information you need efficiently, without wasting precious time.
- You don't need to know everything, but you need to know how to find the relevant information.

References: [Simon Fraser University](#), [UNSW Sydney](#)