

EXAM REVISION SESSIONS - SESSION 2: How to do well on the exam

1. How did the exam writing exercise go? What worked well? What didn't work well?

2. What level and type of knowledge did you require to answer the questions? Was there any type of knowledge / skill you felt you were lacking, what was it?

3. Based on conducting this exercise, what changes are you planning to make to your revision strategies?

**EXAM QUESTIONS**

1. What is the purpose of the exam questions?

2. What makes for a good answer? What elements does a high level answer contain?

**MOST COMMON MISTAKE:**

Writing an answer that provides a general overview of the topic as opposed to an answer to a specific question

An exam question is not a memory test; an answer should therefore not be an overview of all your knowledge, or a random collection of facts and citations

**PRO-TIP:** have a look at the examiners' reports online (Weblearn) – this will tell you what examiners think are good and bad answers

**A good exam answer:**

1. Answers the specific question that is asked
2. Deals with the particular components of the question
  - a. Define concepts in the question
  - b. Pay attention to the structure of the question (“to what extent” “under what conditions” “has developed” will tell you whether you should consider discussing the degree / development over time etc.)
3. Has a clear argument and structure
4. Uses data [secondary literature / primary sources / specific examples] to support the argument
5. Considers counter-arguments

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EXAMPLE QUESTION 1

*What price does the US pay for its exceptionalism?*

1. Analyse the question; what are the different components of the question?
2. Which terms/ concepts might you need to define?
3. Write down a few bullet-points of what your answer would be
4. Based on your revision – which types of information are you lacking?

**Analysing the question:**

Price: define, monetary, relational, reputational?

Exceptionalism: definition; how do we observe exceptionalism, differences in definition?

EXAMPLE QUESTION 2

*Has the US Senate become dysfunctional?*

Analysing the question:

US Senate: describe the senate, what are its powers, it's goal, it's relation to other actors

Dysfunctional: in what way, in terms of legislation, accountability, representation?

Become: signals a potential development over time – have shifts occurred?

**REVISION STRATEGIES**

Now that we know a bit better what is required at the exam, remember the following:

1. Revision is not about memorizing, but about synthesizing
2. Make connections between the various articles/books you read
3. Think about how you would use a particular article in an exam question:
  - a. Study X is an example of .....; Study X supports / contradicts argument Y
  - b. Study X contradicts Study Y
4. Think about how you evaluate the work that you read: is it convincing – why (not?)  
Which criticisms might you level against the studies that you read?
5. Read through old exam questions before you start revising a topic, this way you can keep the types of questions in mind whilst you are reading

The table below provides a way to summarise literature in a way that reflects the use in an exam question:

Study	Topic	Main Argument	Data used	Criticism	Use in Exam
Author X and Y	US Congress	Senate is dysfunctional because it barely legislates	Overview of number of bills passed in the period 1990-1998	Uses old data Looks only at functionality in terms of legislation	Supports argument dysfunctional  Contradicts Study Z
Author Z	US Congress President	President is ineffective, Senate hampers executive power	Description of Clinton presidency	Perhaps limited to Clinton period	Contradicts study XY because Senate is functional

### WHAT IF I PANIC DURING THE EXAM?

- (1) Breathe – relax
- (2) This happens to many students – it does not mean that you will fail the exam
- (3) Think happy thoughts: what will you do once the exam is over?
- (4) Know that you can do this!
- (5) Think about the things you do know – You know a lot more than you realise

### When you have calmed down:

- (1) Is there any way to convert the question into a question you are more comfortable with? Is there part of the question you might know something about?
- (2) Think back to all the lectures and tutorials, start writing down thoughts and bits of knowledge that you have about the topic
- (3) Think about the “real world” and general knowledge you may have about the topic, newspaper articles you’ve read, news you’ve watched – this might give you some contemporary examples
- (4) Start writing and know that writing anything is better than writing nothing