How to Write Online Open-Book Exams

Open-book exams may sound easy, but they come with their own set of challenges.

Keep in mind that your professor has planned this exam with the knowledge that you'll have access to all your notes, textbook, and lectures. Therefore, they might have chosen questions that are more complex or in-depth than something they would ask for on a standard closed-book exam.

Many open-book online exams are still timed. You will need to prepare yourself beforehand and keep on track in order to be able to finish within the time limit.

Preparing ahead of time

Do sample exams, or sample questions, if provided. Just like with a closed-book exam, this will show how well you're able to recall information, which areas you should focus more on studying, and let you know what kind of questions to expect on the real thing.

Don't overload yourself with too many resources. It's important to have your notes close by, but this can also be overwhelming and make it take a long time to find something. For example, it's faster and easier to reference notes you've taken from a reading, summarizing the key ideas and arguments, than the entire book chapter itself.

Use the Cornell method. For note-taking, this layout makes it easy to find a particular idea or definition on the page, because they are all separated from the body of the text.

Prepare a formula sheet. If your course involves calculations, prepare a formula sheet like you would for any other exam. Having everything in one place for easy referral will save you time.

Colour-coding can also help. If you use dividers in a binder of notes, you can flip more easily to each chapter. You can also have different colours of sticky notes hanging over the edge of the page like tabs – use one colour for formulas, another for definitions, and a third for dates. Alternatively, use colour-coded sticky notes or coloured highlighters to group things by topic that you'll be tested on.

Setting up your environment

If you're writing an open-book exam online, chances are it'll be done at home instead of in-class or on campus. The environment can make a difference if you're used to writing exams in a silent lecture hall. Many online exams only permit one attempt, so if you get signed out you can't try again. For this reason, a direct connection to the Internet using an ethernet cable is more reliable than Wi-Fi.

Limit distractions. If you can, let your roommates or family members know ahead of time that you're writing an exam, and how long it will take. That way, they will hopefully try to avoid making noise or interrupting you. Use headphones or earplugs to cut down on outside noise if necessary.

Sit facing a wall, if possible. This way, you won't get distracted by things going on elsewhere in the room or outside the window. Make sure the area is well-lit so you can read your notes.

Don't use your phone. Turn your phone off entirely, place it in another room, or give it to someone else to hold while you write the exam. Even if you only intend to check your phone quickly, you may get distracted and accidentally use up your test time! This also prevents you from speaking with other students about the exam, which is considered academic misconduct.

While writing the exam

Answer the questions you know best first. If the software you're using allows you to skip a question and come back, do so. It might help to keep a blank piece of paper handy where you can write down the questions you've skipped. This will help you remember to go back and answer them later.

Try not to be over-reliant on your notes. The temptation is understandable, because the notes are so easily available. But you risk running out of time to complete the exam if you're searching for every single answer.

Resist the temptation to Google answers. Not only will you be breaking academic integrity, but Google could lead you to sources which aren't relevant to your course. Your professor has provided you with specific resources for a reason, and all the information you need to complete the exam should be found in your course material - unless they specifically ask you to do your own research.

Don't second-guess yourself. If you can confidently answer a question without using your notes, great! Do so and move on, rather than potentially wasting time by flipping through your notes to confirm you're right. Save checking your notes for questions where you really aren't sure.

Answer in your own words. If there are short- or long-answer questions, incorporate your own ideas instead of copying word-for-word from the notes or textbook. Your professor is looking for your deeper understanding and application of the ideas, not simple repetition. They may also give better marks to answers that involve some degree of originality.

Use your time wisely. Remember not to rush just for the sake of being done early – if you have leftover time at the end, use it to go back and review your answers before submitting the exam.

Prioritize highly weighted questions. If you're running out of time, be sure to complete the questions that are worth the most marks, if applicable. It's better to leave a multiple-choice question worth one mark blank than a short answer question worth five.

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