

# Testing, Testing...



## Maximizing Your Grade on Blue Book Exams

Many of you are new to the world of blue book exams. For many students, the first one is a rather panicky experience: a stack of blank paper that you're supposed to fill with only a few lines of question for prompting. It's particularly bad if your high school preparation did not emphasize essay exams or the writing of essays under stress. Blue book exams aren't as bad as everyone claims, particularly not if you prepare for them properly. Below are some strategies to help you maximize your grade on these kinds of exams.

- Know the logistics and be prepared.

Before you go into an exam of any type, know the logistics. This goes for any type of exam. Will blue books be checked as you enter? If so, have it out as you come in. Is pencil allowed? (Frequently it's not, or is strongly discouraged.) Should exams be turned in as you finish, or should you wait until everyone is finished?

Then there are the basic things. Use the restroom before you go to the exam, particularly in large lecture classes. Take a pen, or two sharpened pencils. Most instructors strongly prefer pen as it's much easier to read; also, if grade appeals are allowed, pencil (and erasable pen and White-Out) are normally prohibited. It's usually better to take a blue book more than you expect to need in case you mess up or run out of space. This is especially true for a comprehensive final exam. Wear a watch; leave the ballcap and cell phone at home as you likely won't be permitted either. If you can do without your backpack or any other bulky things for that class, leave them at home too as there's not much room to store them in many classrooms. When you enter a lecture hall for an exam, move all the way to the center of the row and store your bag below your seat. If you need to remain at your seat until the exam time is finished, bring a non-related book or something else silent to keep yourself busy if you finish early.

- Be logical and strategic. Plan ahead.

First, know your blue book and consider how you're going to format your work. Know all of the information that goes on the front, like your instructor's name and your course and section number, and your university ID (if the instructor uses blind grading). Does your blue book have margins? Some don't; consider if you need to draw some in or just remember to leave space. Many instructors recommend writing in every other space, especially if you want comments returned by the instructor. This has another benefit: it leaves you room to go back and add things that you remember later in the exam. If you take this route, always plan to bring a spare blue book in case you run out of space.

Second, read the entire exam before you write anything. Many exams are multi-part, or you have choice in which questions to answer. Develop a strategy for answering the questions: tackle the parts worth more first, or those which you feel you can do best, or those which you think will take the most time. This is different for each person, and you may find you have to try different approaches in different exams until you find the one that works best for you. Here, it is very important to consider the relative weights of each part/question in determining the final grade. If you choose to answer the questions or do the sections in any order other than the one they're listed in on the exam, be sure to label clearly each of your answers with the section/question that you're answering. (It's not necessary to write out the entire question—just "Q2 - banking" is fine.)

- Be thorough.

For each question, read the whole thing before you write anything. Identify each sub-question and figure out what it's asking you to do. Then, brainstorm and outline. It doesn't have to be anything detailed, but take a moment to quickly get your ideas on paper and organized *before* you start writing. Believe me, it saves time later on! Better yet, if you run out of time writing the essay itself, many graders will give partial credit for the outline, which shows that you knew the information and were going somewhere with it. Think about what examples you can use, what concepts are relevant, what vocabulary or concept mastery the instructor wants to evaluate with this question. Plan accordingly.

When you're writing the actual answer, be sure to answer all the sub-questions. You can help the grader by indicating each sub-question response with the use of key words from the question to draw attention to your answers to each part. Write out abbreviations the first time you use them. Use the language of the subject matter as much as you can; if you use a vocabulary word, be sure to show that you know what it means. Avoid fancy language, verbosity, editorializing, and pomposity as they tend to take more away from your grade than add to it. If the instructor cannot extract your points from your prose, don't expect to get points for it.

When you're done writing, re-read your essay. Double-check that you responded to all the parts of the main question. Check your spelling; look for sentence fragments. If necessary, clean up any parts of the essay which may be difficult to read or illegible. For those who prefer writing in ink, leaving extra spaces (between lines of text or between paragraphs/sections) is utterly indispensable. White-Out is generally prohibited in exams.

The bottom line is this: *the instructor can only grade what you write in the blue book*. If you don't write it, even in an outline, there's no way to know that you know that information, so it doesn't get you points. If the instructor can't find it, can't understand it, or can't read it, it doesn't get you points. Don't approach a blue book exam thinking about things that will make you lose points; think about what you can do to earn more points.

Don't let a blue book exam stress you out or psych you out. They may be different from what you're used to, but that will change in time. With planning and preparation, a lot of the discomfort and uncertainty can be removed. Putting in the time—even a couple minutes—to plan your strategy for the exam and your approach to each question pays off in the end.

Good luck!