

Analysing examination papers

Exam papers in general

Exam papers are often packed tight with information, regulations, and instructions as well as the list of questions they present. If the first time you see one is when you sit down on the day of the examination, you will be adding to the number of difficulties you face. You would have to spend valuable time first of all reading and then trying to understand its codes and format. For this reason you should acquaint yourself with past papers as part of your revision. In this way you will know in advance the usual number of questions you must answer, the amount of time you are allowed, and any specific instructions in the rubric which might limit your potential choices.

If you have been following these guidance notes systematically you might have already obtained such past papers and used them to inform your course work in preparation for an exam. If you have not, they should be acquired (or checked in a library) some weeks before the examination. Don't leave this until the last minute. These papers offer a great deal of valuable information.

It is rare but just possible that the format of an examination paper may be changed from one year to the next. Most institutions play fair in this respect and will announce any such changes well in advance; but in order to be quite sure you are at liberty to make your own enquiries.

Some departments might be reluctant to reveal their specific intentions regarding any such changes, but they have a statutory obligation to announce how any course will be examined. In addition, you have a right to be allowed access to this information. My own experience is that many will not exactly fall over backwards to help you, but you cannot be denied the information.

Some institutions (the Open University for instance) issue specimen examination papers to inform students on these matters: (they are usually papers which were set the previous year). Such information is exactly what you require, but it should also be said that it might offer temptations which could be misleading. Some students use past papers in an attempt to predict the content of the one they are due to face. This