

**Turton
School**

Handling The Exam

A Guide to Examination Technique

2014-15

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INTRODUCTION

These notes do not pretend to bring any new information about the examinations to you or your children but they do draw together advice and ideas that have been given in:

- Subject teaching
- C4W Tutorials
- Assemblies

Parents cannot go into the exam with their sons and daughters but they can help to make sure that the information here is understood, absorbed and acted upon. If you are in any doubt about any of the information you have received tonight then do not hesitate to contact us.

PUBLIC EXAMINATIONS

These examinations are public exams and this means that rules have been agreed across the whole country by all the exam boards. They are there to prevent cheating. Though at times they can appear unnecessary, even excessive, we are obliged to operate them.

Breaking the rules inevitably leads to disqualification not just from that particular exam where the offence took place but in some cases from all exams with that Board.

Main Rules

- 1. There should be no communication with other candidates inside the exam room.**
 - Obviously no talking or written communication is allowed.
 - This commences from the moment the candidates enter the exam room to the time all the exam papers are collected.
 - Equally no visual communication.
 - Looking around.
 - Catching people's eyes.
 - Disturbing others in any way.
 - Attention should always be directed to the front.
 - **Mobile phones are not allowed.** If one goes off in the exam, even if it's been left in a bag, or a mobile is found on the candidate's person, it will lead to disqualification.
- 2. There should be no written information available.**
 - Hence the need for see-through pencil cases.
 - Neither bags nor coats near the exam desks.
 - No writing on hands etc.
- 3. Late entry and early departure are not allowed.**
 - After 30 minutes students cannot enter.
 - Early leaving is not allowed.
 - Students should arrive 10 minutes before the start of each exam.

TAKING OWNERSHIP OF THE EXAMINATION

Specifications

All exams are based on printed specifications. These are all available online and can include detailed information. It will be helpful to know in advance:

- How many papers?
- What weighting do these carry?
- How long is each paper?
- How are the papers structured?
- How are the marks spread across the paper?
- Is there a mark scheme available?

Past Papers

In most subjects there will be past papers and mark schemes available on-line. Studying these will enable pupils to become familiar with the structure and layout of the paper and this can save time in the actual exam. The instructions on the front of each paper are very important and should be familiar before the exam.

However, exams can change and there is no guarantee that there will not be slight changes to the paper. Therefore, the instructions should always be checked.





TIMING

The first thing is to arrive on the right day at the right time.

This is so obvious that you might feel that it is not worth saying, but every year we have candidates who arrive late (“I thought it was a 9.30 am start”), or who confuse a.m. and p.m., or who mistake the day completely.

Mis-timing in the exam itself is the most common failing that can be encountered on exam papers. The time for the exam must be divided appropriately so the amount of time spent on a particular section is proportionate to the marks allocated.

This will inevitably mean that answers will be less thorough than they should be at times, but this is preferable to not finishing the exam.

E.g. an exam has four questions with 25 marks available for each.

- **A spends too much time on the first three questions and doesn't attempt the fourth.**
- **B spends her time equally on the four questions.**

PUPIL	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	TOTAL
A	25	25	25	0	75
B	20	20	20	20	80

Equally, individual questions sometimes have a breakdown of marks within them. If there is an **hour** for a question and

Part (i) has 10 marks

Part (ii) has 30 marks

then only **15 minutes** should be given to the first part!!

This all seems so obvious, but in the stress of the start of an exam can be forgotten.

Our final word about timing: some will be able to finish the exam very quickly because they just do not know enough or because they cannot produce lengthy answers. It is far better for these pupils to take rests during the course of the exam rather than leave themselves vast amounts of time at the end. It is when this happens that the rule infringements start to creep in, because they become bored.



UNDERSTANDING THE QUESTION

So they have turned up on time,
they have got all the equipment (and all the back-up equipment!) needed,
and their mascot,
and their cough sweets.

They know the structure of the exam and they know the instructions by heart. They have written the timings of the exam at the top of the paper. **Now all they have to do is answer the questions!**

If timing is the major problem in examinations then **mis-reading the question**, or merely failing to read it at all, is the second most common error.

Mark schemes invariably award marks only to the **relevant** parts of an answer.

So what can they do to make sure they are relevant?

Firstly, they must **mark the key words** of a question, and I mean literally mark them. Using a highlighter is a good way of making sure that they do consciously know what the question is asking.

Once the key words have been highlighted they still have to be interpreted. For this, it is important that pupils are familiar with all the '**command**' language for each particular subject.

If this is not given by the department, it can be worked out by looking through past papers.

Opposite is an example from Geography, which could equally apply to any subject.

Command Language and Exam Technique

The following is a list of the common words and phrases that are used in the exam – we call this command language. To achieve a good grade in the exam it is essential that you understand these and can address your answer to them in the exam. You should be very familiar with this list and get someone to test you regularly.

DO NOT LEAVE IT UNTIL THE LAST MINUTE – THESE PHRASES ARE AS IMPORTANT AS THE WORK COVERED IN CLASS.

Describe

Only describe what is shown. **DO NOT EXPLAIN OR GIVE REASONS**

e.g. the picture shows a sea arch and sea stack.

Describe and suggest reasons for (or describe and explain).....

This is your chance to first describe and then go onto the explanation. However, remember that if this is worth 6 marks you must address both parts of the question. Students sometimes produce a superb explanation but no description and so only receive 3 marks. This is a common mistake.

E.g. The picture shows a sea arch and a stack. These are produced by hydraulic pressure, attrition and saltation.

With reference to an example that you have studied.....

This is crucial to achieving a high level 3 answer. You must quote one of the case studies and then refer to it during the answer.

From the information, give evidence of.....

This is the same as explain but you **must** only give evidence using the information that is given to you i.e. from graphs or diagrams etc.

Give a reason for.....

If this phrase is used you can give evidence from your own knowledge and you are not restricted to evidence given to you.

Issues which arise from.....

This is a complex phrase and really means “explain what happens as a result of”.

E.g. The issues which arise from an ageing population include the need to have an adequate pension system.

Advantages and Disadvantages.....

The problem here is to avoid writing a list and only addressing one or other side of the question. If there are 6 marks available, you will receive a maximum of 3 for advantages and a maximum of 3 for disadvantages. It is crucial therefore to produce a balanced answer.

Natural Features or Physical Features.....

These are natural and you must not go on to give man-made features.

Explain with the aid of diagrams.....

If the question asked for this, you must draw diagrams in the answer.

Describe the effect of.....

This is a key phrase and it is asking you to make links between a number of points. E.g. The effect of groynes being built in Bournemouth has led to an increase in the amount of erosion further along the coast.

Political factors.....

This will be referred to in the agriculture section (possibly others). If it says political, only give political reasons not physical.

E.g. The EU has affected agriculture by the introduction of the quota system (i.e. affected by a political reason).

Suggest.....

This key command is used when students are to apply their learning to a new situation, which they may not have met before.



ANSWERING THE QUESTION

Once the question has been ‘deconstructed’ in this way then the students will have quickly to decide on the appropriate material.

In papers with short answers, this is not usually a problem. Once the material is recalled, it is set down, usually in two or three lines.

However for essay-type answers, although there is usually very little time, a quick diagrammatic plan can help to make sure that everything is listed that needs to go in the answer. The answer should then stick to this and not drift off to cover irrelevant areas. Keep to the point and leave out everything that is not needed to answer the question.

- Stick to the time plan.
- Stick to the point
- Make points quickly.

It is important to finish the question properly and not to resort to note-form answers. One more properly written paragraph is better than half a page of scribbled notes.

It helps if there is time to review the answer to ensure that any mistakes are spotted and corrected. Students will need to be very controlled to give themselves a few minutes for this, but an increasing proportion of marks are given to punctuation, grammar and spelling and a quick check may gain some of these. Almost all exams now award a proportion of the marks, usually up to 10% for good “literacy”.