**Making and using question banks (Phil Race)**

Imagine how pleased you’d feel if you could have a list, weeks in advance, of all the possible exam questions you needed to prepare to be able to answer. You can have exactly this! You can *make* just such a list for yourself. Making – and *using* – such a list of questions can be the key to effective, efficient revision. This in turn leads to good exam results, and everything which follows on from that. But what’s a ‘question bank’ and how can you make one? The following tips explain more.

**Making your own question bank**

1. **If you know all of the questions, you’re well on the way to being able to give all of the answers.** A common lament after exams is ‘if only I’d known what the questions were going to be…’. But you *can* work out what they could be, especially if you start collecting questions early.
2. **It’s never too early to start collecting questions.** You can, in fact, start making a question bank as soon as you start studying something. You can even start writing down questions *before* you’ve done anything else – for example all the questions you can think of that, sooner or later, you suspect you may need to become able to answer.
3. **It’s a useful habit to adopt.** Many students who’ve once been through the process of making and then using a question bank as an integral part of their studies, continue to make such a bank as a chosen study strategy. They often report that they find it one of the most efficient and effective methods of ‘keeping tabs on how their learning is going on a day-to-day basis’ through a course. They also report that using a question bank as a revision tool proves to be one of the best ways of ensuring that revision is focused and efficient.
4. **It’s never too late to continue to add further questions.** Even during the final stages of revising for an exam, you will often think of yet more questions you need to be able to answer. It’s best, however, not to add *too* many questions at this late stage, or you may become discouraged by the amount that you still don’t know about the topic.
5. **What sort of questions?** The questions which are most useful as part of your question bank are the short, sharp ones. Most of these questions will be one-liners – sometimes containing only a few words each. They all need to end with a question-mark (to help you to practise answering them in due course), and all need to contain at least one *question* word or phrase.
6. **Keep asking yourself ‘what am I *reasonably* expected to become able to do with this?’.** Ask yourself this question all the time – in lectures, when you’re reading, when you’re talking to other people, when you’re thinking about a topic, and so on. Then capture your thinking about what you could reasonably be asked to do – turn your thinking into questions which you can aim to become able to answer.
7. **What’s a question word or phrase?** These almost all have a word containing ‘w’ in them. Such words and phrases include ‘Why…?’ ‘What…?’, ‘Where…?’, ‘Who…?’, ‘How…?’ ‘When…?’.
8. **The word ‘else’ can be really useful in your question-bank questions.** For example, if you could already answer the questions ‘Why…?’ ‘What…?’, ‘Where…?’, ‘Who…?’, ‘How…?’ ‘When…?’ about something, think how much more you’d know about it if you could *also* answer the following questions about the same thing: ‘Why *else*…?’ ‘What *else* …?’, ‘Where *else* …?’, ‘Who *else* …?’, ‘How *else* …?’ ‘When *else* …?’.
9. **Use your syllabus.** In course handbooks or elsewhere, your syllabus will often be expressed in terms of ‘intended learning outcomes’, explaining in some detail what you will be expected to be able to do in due course to *show* that you’ve mastered each topic. It is often very useful to start with such learning outcomes, and turn them all into a list of questions, which you can then systematically set about becoming able to answer effectively.
10. **The ‘instruction’ words from exam questions are useful too.** Just about all exam questions contain words or phrases such as ‘Discuss…’, ‘Describe…’, ‘Explain…’ ‘Show that…’, ‘Prove that…’, ‘Compare…’, ‘Contrast…’, ‘Compare and contrast…’, ‘Evaluate…’, ‘Distinguish between…’, ‘Summarise…’, ‘List five reasons why…’ ‘Decide…’, and so on.
11. **How many short questions makes a question bank?** The more the better. Question banks can contain hundreds of short questions – even thousands. If you can answer all of these short questions, you can automatically answer any longer question. Even the most complex exam question is only a lot of short questions rolled into one.
12. **Use your lectures to get questions for your question bank.** During a lecture, every time you sense that something is really important, turn it there and then into a question for your question bank. Don’t wait till hours later to do this – the questions may have evaporated from your mind by then. Capture them during the lecture. Write them into your notes, or directly into a question bank you have already started, and have there with you.
13. **Add worked examples done in lectures or tutorials.** Often, lecturers use worked examples to illustrate the kinds of question you need to become able to answer under your own steam in due course. Lecturers sometimes adapt such questions for forthcoming exams, perhaps just changing them a little for that purpose.
14. **Keep questions and answers apart.** When you’ve got worked examples or solved problems in your lecture notes, it’s useful to write the *question* itself into your question bank, so that you can look at it again, this time *without* the answer directly in sight. This gives you the chance to have another go at the question on your own from scratch, without the temptation just to read the answer you’ve already got.It can be useful to include a note to remind you of where the answer can be found, so that you can look it up quickly (but not *too* quickly!) if you have trouble trying to answer the question on your own as you revise.
15. **Add any questions or tasks set as homework or suggested follow-up work.** Once again, keep the questions apart from the work you may have done yourself on them, so that you remain able to practise on the questions without risking ‘cheating yourself’ by looking too early at the answers.
16. **When you read books, handouts, articles, web pages, continue to gather questions.** For example, if you’re reading a particular paragraph, ask yourself ‘what question is this paragraph the answer to?’ If it turns out to be an important question – one which *you* may need to become able to answer – capture the question, and add it to your question bank.
17. **Trawl textbooks and other source material for worked – or open – questions.** Most source materials contain both worked examples, and further questions for students to try, sometimes indeed with answers in an appendix. When you find questions that are directly relevant to your own syllabus, it can be useful to copy selected questions into your question bank, along with notes to prompt you about the source of the question, and where you may find the solution or answer if it is available.
18. **Use old exam papers to fine-tune your question bank.** A big advantage of doing this is that it helps you to find out the expected *standard* of the questions you need to prepare to become able to answer yourself. It helps you to see *how many* short, sharp questions are involved in a typical exam question.
19. **Do some question spotting.** It’s always useful to put your mind to what may be due to come up as an exam question. You could be spot-on, and have the opportunity to practise so that you will be able to answer such a question easily, quickly and painlessly – worth the chance! Even when the questions you think of don’t come up, at least some of the knowledge you’ve gained by practising with them is likely to be useful in answering some of the questions which do come up.
20. **Capture other people’s questions too.** For example, in a lecture if someone else asks a question, jot that question down yourself too – you too may need to remain able to answer that question in due course.
21. **Build your question bank with like-minded fellow students.** If you build a question bank along with several friends, you’ll all end up with a much better question bank than any of you could have build up individually. You’ll each tend to think of at least some questions which no-one else thought of.
22. **Don’t worry yet about being able to *answer* all of your questions.** The important thing is that you’ve captured the questions themselves. Once you’ve captured a question, it’s relatively straightforward to find out what the answer may be. You can look it up, or ask fellow students, or ask a lecturer, or work it out for yourself sometimes.

**Putting your question bank to work for you**

In the previous set of tips, we’ve looked at the purposes of making a question bank, and at a variety of ways of gathering questions for it. Next, we’ll look at some ways of turning it into a really useful learning tool, and processes for putting it to work to help you master your subject material.

1. **Consider making it a portable tool.** For example, if you get yourself a pocket-sized notebook, you could use different parts of the book to write in questions for different subjects, with index tabs to help you find each topic easily. Post-its can be inserted instead of index tabs.
2. **Think about numbering the questions for each topic.** This gives you a way of keeping track more easily of which questions you *can* answer without any difficulty, and which are going to need a bit more practice or research before you get them firmly into your repertoire.
3. **Explore whether it will be helpful for you to have both questions and prompts in your question bank.** If you do decide to do this, however, it’s best to keep the prompts out of sight of the questions. For example, if one page had 17 short, sharp questions as a numbered list, you could write overleaf a set of prompts also numbered 1-17. These should be just enough to *start* you off towards answering the question, for those occasions where the answer has ‘slipped’. Sometimes, however, if the actual answer to the question is very short, you might prefer to simply include it in your prompts – for example if the question involved a calculation, you could use the right answer as your prompt.
4. **Would you be happier making an electronic question bank?** If you happen to have easy access to the sort of software used for making multiple-choice tests, for example, you could build up your own question bank as a computer-aided learning programme. Your ‘prompts’ could be summoned up on-screen by pressing a ‘help’ button. The only problem with making a computer-based question bank is that you could be limited in the places you could use to practise with it – you’d need to be at your machine – or any machine if you put your question bank on floppy disk or CD for example.
5. **Some students prefer playing cards.** You could, for example, write a few questions on filing cards – the sort you may well be using for keeping track of your literature searching. You could write questions on one side of the cards, and prompts on their other sides. You could file the cards in a box, with index cards separating one subject from another. You could then draw a card from your box at random, and see how well you were able to answer the questions on it.
6. **Don’t just make it, *use* it.** Like any other tool, a learning tool such as a question bank only does a useful job if you put it to work. Your aim should be to continue practising answering your questions, until you become able to do so easily and correctly.
7. **Regard it as good news every time you find a question you can’t yet answer.** It’s always useful to find out something which you didn’t know you didn’t yet know. This is far better than only finding out too late, when you wouldn’t have been able to answer an exam question which depended on the same bit of knowledge.
8. **Find out more about those questions you can’t answer *repeatedly.*** These are the ones which are going to need your attention. They are usually the most difficult questions. However, the more often you *fail* to answer it, then go about finding out how to answer it, the less likely you are to forget it yet again. It’s often the questions on which you practised several times that turn out to be the most valuable ones in your question bank.
9. **Don’t waste much time on the questions you can answer easily.** While it’s always very pleasant to sit there answering straightforward questions successfully, you’re not learning as much doing this as struggling a little harder with the questions which are more difficult or where the answers seem elusive.
10. **Check, however, that you *can* answer those questions which you think you’ve mastered.** Being able to answer what seems like an easy question is something you shouldn’t take for granted until you’ve *done it* at least once. It’s only too possible to sit there thinking ‘yes, I know how to do this’, but not yet actually be able to do it.
11. **Turn it into a game.** If you’ve got your questions on cards in a box, you can draw cards at random to help you ring the changes between one subject and another. You could ‘file’ the cards bearing questions you had no difficulty with in one box, and those cards bearing questions needing attention in another box. You could then come back to these on another day, and give them that extra practice they needed.