**Answering questions to maximise your marks (Phil Race)**

This, after all, is the business of doing well at exams. Your aim for the main part of the exam is to get as many marks as you can. This is alongside the aim to lose as few marks as you can. If you already regard this as a game, you’re on the right track. If you actually *enjoy* this game, you’re probably one of the relatively few people who actually like exams. If however this game is not your favourite one, now’s the time to find out a little more about some of the rules of the game so that you play the game well when you need to do so. Here, we’ll look at some general points, then in separate sets of tips you can download from this website, we’ll look more specifically at the two main types of question: essays and calculations.

1. **Keep, within reasonable limits, to the timetable you planned for the exam.** *(Please see separate set of tips on ‘the first few minutes of an exam’)***.** It’s important not to write too much about your first couple of questions, where you may indeed have a lot more that you *could* write than would fit into the time you have available.
2. **Build up your stock of marks actually scored.** Most people find it best to do the ‘easy’ questions first, and to save the ‘hard’ ones for later. Of course, ‘easy’ and ‘hard’ actually depend on how well practised you happen to be for the various questions. When you feel you’ve got a couple of straightforward questions under your belt – and possibly reached the pass mark for the whole exam, you can then feel a lot more relaxed as you tackle the questions you’re not so hot on.
3. **Make good use of any chance to get ahead of schedule.** For example, if one of your early questions is a problem or calculation, and you’re well practised at handling such questions, you may get it completely right (and score all of the available marks) in a lot less than the time you allocated to the question. Then it’s worth pressing on, continuing ahead of your schedule, but keeping a watchful eye on the time in case a later question takes more time than you’ve gained (perhaps because you’re struggling with it).
4. **Re-read the questions really often as you answer them.** Make sure that you stick to what the questions ask you to do. All of the available marks are linked to exactly what the question asks for. There are no marks at all for things the question *doesn’t* ask for. If you don’t keep your eye on a question, it’s really easy to forget what it asked for, and to waste a lot of time putting down things which though perfectly correct, won’t do you any good.
5. **If there’s part of a question you can’t answer, get on with the rest of it.** If it happens to be the *first* part of the question that eludes you, leave a space for you to have a go at it later, and start with the part you’re ready to answer – start with marks you *can* score.
6. **When you get stuck, don’t try to force yourself on.** For example if there’s something important that you need for a question that just won’t come back to you (for example a formula you need for a calculation, or an important name or fact or piece of data), don’t try forcing your brain to recall it. That’s what causes ‘mental blanks’ – brains rebel at being cruelly treated and switch off for a while! Almost all mental blanks are caused by owners being cruel to their brains! If you feel yourself getting tenser, now’s the time to move on to something you *do* remember. For the moment, forget about your timetable, and move on to another question which you know is going to be straightforward to you. Most times, the elusive bit of information will filter back into your mind while you’re busy doing something else, and will be there when you go back to the original question.
7. **Don’t forget to breathe!** Even in an exam, give yourself a minute off now and then, just to let your brain have a rest. Give your thoughts time to settle themselves into sensible patterns. Give your brain time to think. If you’re too busy writing to have time to think, what you write won’t be very good.
8. **Make it easy for the examiner.** Examiners are busy people. They may have a huge pile of scripts to mark, and an imminent deadline to meet so that the marks can be processed in time for the exam board. They’re working under pressure. They’re almost certainly tired. They may well be fed up of seeing students getting things wrong or demonstrating their confusion. They may be depressed. If *your* script is quite easy to mark, because you’ve laid it out tidily for example, or because your handwriting is quite good, it makes the examiner’s task that bit easier. That makes examiners that bit more favourably disposed towards your answers, and more generous with the marks they give.
9. **Don’t write *anything* in red ink.** It’s normal for the *examiner* to be using a red pen to mark your script. The examiner may be underlining your mistakes in red – so it’s not a good idea for *you* to have underlined your main points in red too! The examiner will be writing in sub-totals and totals in red – so it’s not a good idea for you to have written any numbers in red too. In a way, if you too are using a red pen for anything, you’ve invading the examiner’s psychological territory – don’t take this risk.
10. **Don’t go mad with your highlighters.** While it can be useful to use your highlighter on the *question* paper for your own benefit, it can be distracting to use highlighters on your answers. They may even be forbidden by the exam regulations. Besides, scripts are often photocopied for double-marking purposes, or ‘moderation’, or to send samples to the external examiner. Highlighting doesn’t photocopy well!
11. **Put your candidate number and other details on *any* further sheets of paper.** If you do work on graph sheets, or extra loose sheets of paper, or a second exam booklet, make sure your details are all there too. Don’t risk your valuable work getting separated from your main script or lost – along with all the marks you’ve earned.
12. **Don’t risk being thought to be cheating.** When you raise your eyes from your work, for a rest, for example, don’t look intently at anyone else. Avoid making eye contact with any other candidates. Take particular care if you feel any other candidate is trying to make eye contact with you – look somewhere else. And don’t appear to be reading someone else’s script in front of you or to one side of you – even if your eyesight is such that you *can* actually read it. Don’t move something you’ve written to a position on your desk where it would be more easily read by someone at the side or behind you. Obviously don’t talk to anyone. If you *need* to say something, raise your hand, keep it raised, and look expectantly until an invigilator notices and comes up to you.
13. **If you think something is wrong with the exam paper, ask an invigilator to investigate.** Sometimes, there could be some data missing from a question. Sometimes, you may not have been issued with something that is needed to answer a question. Just occasionally, a question could have been mis-typed somewhere, and simply doesn’t make sense. If anything like this happens, raise your hand, and explain quietly what you think is wrong to an invigilator. They will normally make all reasonable efforts to find out whether indeed something *is* wrong or not. They may have to go out and telephone the original question-setter. They may have to send for someone else to come and decide if there is a problem or not. If something *is* wrong, an announcement may eventually be made to all of the candidates for that particular exam. But while this is all going on – don’t sit and wait and wait and wait – get on with another question where there is no problem. Continue to chase marks while the problem is being investigated.