# Supporting students who are taking online, open-book examinations

In Trinity term 2021, the majority of students will be taking online, open-book exams. Even in more normal circumstances, examinations can be daunting for students, and in the Student Feedback Channel many students conveyed their apprehension about how exams would work this year.

This resource gives ideas for supporting students to develop their revision and exam skills, and to build their confidence.

Further ideas can be found in the [Oxford Teaching Idea on Collections and Revision Classes](https://ctl.web.ox.ac.uk/collections-revision-classes).

## Social support and wellbeing

It is now likely that the majority of students will be preparing for and sitting exams from home. Through the Student Feedback Channel, students have told us that they find working from home isolating, and that they really appreciate opportunities to informally check in with tutors and ask questions. Consider what you can offer to support students informally, and also to encourage students to support each other. For example:

* Take ten minutes in a teaching session to acknowledge the challenges of working at home. Ask students to swap tips about home working, and perhaps share some of your own.
* Schedule online study sessions, for example on Teams, to replicate study in a library or other communal environment. The tutor could be present for ten to 15 minutes, and then students could take the session forward by continuing with study together, perhaps switching off cameras and/or microphones.
* Consider setting up a Teams channel where students can meet informally to study together.

Further information and support for students is available on the [University’s Exam Wellbeing](https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/exams/wellbeing) webpage.

## Familiarity with Inspera, the examinations platform

In Trinity term 2021, students will take examinations on the Inspera online exams platform. Encourage students to [read through the university guidance](https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/exams/open-book/trinity-term), and to [take a practice exam on Inspera](https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/exams/open-book/trinity-term#content-tab--6), so they are confident with the interface. This will be particularly important for examinations where students may handwrite material and then scan and upload it.

Students should receive their personal exam timetable in [Student Self-Service](https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/selfservice) at least two weeks before their first exam. Encourage students to check their exam timetable, and also to check that the timetable displayed in Inspera matches it and is correct. Forthcoming examinations are displayed in Inspera under ‘My Tests’. Further instructions are available in [the university guidance](https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/exams/open-book/trinity-term) for students.

## Revision: Creating materials to have at hand

A benefit of open-book examinations is that students don’t have to memorise all of the material they will draw on in their answers, leaving more space to think creatively about the questions posed. However, having access to any materials they wish can also present the risk that students may spend too long locating material, or being drawn into irrelevant tangents or details.

Encourage students to prepare a succinct summary containing everything they may wish to refer to during the exam, so they don’t have to spend time looking up material. For each topic or area, the summary could be perhaps just two sides of A4, or one larger piece of paper. This is an effective revision method in itself, as distilling material into the most important points requires students to really understand and prioritise their points.

Students may still wish to memorise some information that they need to bring to mind quickly so they can write fluently.

Further advice for students on revision is available on the Disability Advisory Service’s [Skills for Remote Study](https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/guidance/remote) Canvas course, which has talks recorded by SpLD (Specific Learning Difficulty) tutors in summer 2020.

## A fresh response to the question posed

A common pitfall in timed examinations is for students to attempt to replicate an answer they have already written, rather than write a fresh response to the question posed. This trap may be a higher risk where students may have access to past pieces of work, such as tutorial essays. Here are some ways to encourage fresh responses:

* Advise students to develop and draw on summaries, as described above, and avoid looking up tutorial work.
* Teach question analysis skills. In class or tutorial, or even on a Panopto video, take a question and model how to break it down into what exactly is being asked in the question, and possible interpretations or lines of argument. Further ideas about how to do this can be found in the [Oxford Teaching Ideas resource on Collections and Revision Classes](https://ctl.web.ox.ac.uk/collections-revision-classes).
* Practice is the most effective way that students can become comfortable with and skilled at exam responses. Give students the opportunity to practice and submit a whole answer or even paper for feedback. Practising planning is also very effective and will help students become confident with the process of turning a question into a plan of action. Practising plans and full answers will help students judge what their revision summaries will need to contain in order to be most helpful.
* Encourage students to trust in their initial responses, looking things up only if they are unsure, and if they have time. For example, students doing translations could have a go at translating the whole or part of the passage before turning to a dictionary or corpus to check the accuracy of select words or phrases.
* For essay questions, work with students to identify how to keep their answer and line of argument focussed on the question, for example, through signposting. This could include modelling how to craft an introduction with a thesis statement that responds to the question, and producing a plan that outlines not just ideas but the progression of the argument. As for many students, typing is quicker than handwriting, encourage students to reserve time to review and edit their responses. For example, they could revisit the introduction and sharpen it, review topic sentences (the first sentences of each paragraph) to ensure they take forward the line of argument, and check that the introduction and conclusion match up.

Further ideas are available in the [Oxford Teaching Idea on Collections and Revision Classes](https://ctl.web.ox.ac.uk/collections-revision-classes).

## Clarifying expectations and what makes excellent work

It will be particularly important this year to go through guidance from examiners, giving plenty of opportunities for students to ask questions about the process. Students may have questions about how work is to be presented, whether there are different expectations for word counts, and how assessment criteria will be applied. Students may believe that with more time, the standard expected will be higher.

Students often find criteria very abstract and difficult to apply. Share a good example of a paragraph, short answer or solution – either one you have written yourself or anonymised from student work (with their permission). Ask students to consider why it is successful, and how it could be further improved.

Typing rather than handwriting responses may remind students of tutorial work, and they may slip into this mode of working. As described above, practising answers is a very effective method both of revising material, and of becoming familiar with the new format and time constraints. For essays, consider comparing an excerpt from a tutorial essay with an excerpt from an exam essay. Introductions are likely to be a key difference and an exam essay introduction could be shorter and even more sharply focused on the title question. Practising writing plans and introductions swiftly could be a good strategy to help students move beyond tutorial writing mode.

Further ideas on understanding the criteria and what makes excellent work are available in the [Oxford Teaching Idea on Collections and Revision Classes](https://ctl.web.ox.ac.uk/collections-revision-classes).

It may also be helpful to direct students to examiners’ reports, although it’s important to bear in mind these are not primarily written for a student audience, and the tone may not come across as such.

## Creating exam conditions in the home/study bedroom environment

Students may be sitting examinations from home, or from their study bedroom in college, and as such will be responsible for creating their own exam conditions. Discuss with students how they will create an environment conducive to exam focus. For example:

* Ask students to swap tips about how they manage to focus in a home study environment
* Prompt students to consider practical issues, such as how they will monitor time, and which materials they will have to hand.
* Students might enjoy thinking about what might help them feel confident and motivated, like putting together an exams outfit, choosing snacks and/or deciding on a playlist.
* Encourage students to think through step-by-step what they will do on the day of the exam, to make sure they are confident with how the exam will work, and that they have thought about everything they will need.
* Students in international time zones may have some choice around what time they start their examination, which will take careful consideration.
* If students are in Oxford and their study space is not suitable for taking exams, please make them aware that the Student Union can help alternative spaces to take examinations.

Further guidance for students is available on [the University’s Online Exams page](https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/exams/open-book/trinity-term).

## Time management

Ask students to consider how they will break down the allotted time. For example, they could work out how much time it will take to read the paper, and where relevant, choose which questions to answer, and then set a time budget per answer. Students should ideally plan in a screen break per hour, and for longer examinations, students should plan in movement and meal breaks as well.

Encourage students to do full-length practices, so they get a feel for how the time unfolds, how to pace themselves, and how best to break down the time.

If the mode of completion for the exam is Handwritten or Mixed Mode, students will have an additional 30-minutes technical time to upload some or all of the exam response. Encourage students to practice doing this. This additional time must be solely reserved to capture, upload and submit any handwritten elements of the response; if students go over their allocated time, they may incur a penalty. [Further guidance can be found on the open-books exams page](https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/exams/open-book/trinity-term).

## Screen breaks

Encourage students to plan in short screen breaks, ideally every hour, and to consider what they could do off-screen. For example, students may wish to plan their answers by pen-and-paper before they start typing. They may wish to have handwritten summaries of material to hand, in order to save switching between windows, and to give their eyes a brief screen break.

## Technical difficulties

Prompt students to make themselves aware of the technical support for exams in Inspera, which is summarised on the [University’s Online Exams webpage for students](https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/exams/open-book/trinity-term).

## Disruptions due to Covid-19 and other circumstances

Make students aware that if they believe their performance in assessment has been seriously affected by circumstances related to COVID-19 and/or serious personal circumstances such as acute serious illness, chronic illness (including mental health conditions) bereavement etc, they can submit a mitigating circumstances notice to the examiners (MCE) either directly or via the college or department if they are a non-matriculated student. Students can also use the MCE process to explain to examiners why their exam response for an online open-book exam was submitted late.

The University encourages students to keep a log of any disruption they face as a result of COVID-19, so that this can be considered as part of the MCE process. Disruption can include (but is not limited to) difficulties with their environment for remote study, for example, poor-quality internet connection, lack of IT facilities, lack of study space, impact on mental health, financial impacts, and inability to pursue planned studies at present due to lack of access to facilities such as laboratories or libraries.

Further information is available on the [University’s COVID-19 Response: Teaching and Learning page](https://www.ox.ac.uk/coronavirus/students/education) and [on the Oxford Students page](https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/exams/problems-completing-your-assessment).