

UNIT

44

EXAMS – WATCHING THE CLOCK

Use this unit to help you to:

- ▼ make the best use of your time in exams
- ▼ start your exam in a sensible way
- ▼ finish your exam in a productive way.

Introduction

This unit is about making the best use of your time in the exam room. It's not about 'addressing the question' or the finer parts of writing your answers – these are covered in other units in this series. First, try **Activity 1** to find out where you stand.



Read the following statements and tick any (you can tick more than one) that could describe you. Which (if any) of the following is like you?

- 1 I allocate a certain amount of time to answer each question, and keep to my plan.
- 2 I often run out of time in exams.
- 3 I always spend plenty of time at the start, deciding which questions are best for me.
- 4 I always save time for the end, so I can check back over everything I've written.
- 5 I often finish exams with time to spare.

Response

- 1 Excellent. You may not need this unit, although it may be useful for one or two tips.
- 2 This is a common fault. Read on to find out how to cure it.
- 3 This is a good way of starting the exam.
- 4 If only more people would do this. We'll explore the benefits of this later in the unit.
- 5 This is fine, as long as you've really done your best with the questions – but perhaps you've answered them *too* quickly and in not enough depth?

The first few minutes

Let's think about the first 10 minutes or so of the exam. This may be the time you feel most nervous but there are useful things you can do.



See if you can think of three or four useful things to do in the first few minutes of an exam. Note them down below.

Response

Here are some things you could do in the first 10 minutes or so. You may have thought of other useful things to do.

- 1 Write your name (or number) on the answer paper and any other details that are required.
- 2 Check *how many* questions you have to try.
- 3 Check whether or not the questions carry equal marks.
- 4 Work out a provisional timetable for the exam (more about this later).
- 5 Decide which questions you're going to do (if you have a choice).

Planning your campaign

It's very important not to run out of time.

Suppose you have to answer 5 questions worth 20 marks each, and you need 60 marks for a comfortable pass.

- If you attempt all 5, you need to average only 12 marks each
- If you do only 4 questions, you have to average 15 marks each
- If you do only 3 questions, you have to get full marks.

It is worthwhile spending time working out a timetable for doing the exam.

Look at the following example:

A 3-hour exam starts at 0930. There are 5 questions to be done. Here is a provisional timetable:

0930	First 10 minutes
0940	Start 1st question.
1010	Start 2nd question.
1040	Start 3rd question.
1110	Start 4th question.
1040	Start last question.
1210	Last 20 minutes
1230	Time up

This timetable gives gives 'target' times for moving on to the next question, and so on. Notice there are 20 minutes left for checking at the end of the time.

Planning your next exam



Think about your next exam and write out a plan, using the headings below to help.

Details about the exam: _____

Total time allowed: _____

Exam starts at: _____

How many questions you need to do: _____

Do all questions carry equal marks? _____

Are there any *compulsory* questions? _____

Are there any complications such as 'Do one question from Section A, two from Section B, and one each from Sections C and D'? _____

Write in a provisional timetable:

Time	Activity
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Response

Check your plan, using the following questions:

- Have you found out as much as you can about the structure of the exam (number of questions, type of question, etc.)?
- Have you divided the time up logically, for example, giving equal time for equal marks?
- Did you include time for planning which questions to do?
- Did you leave some time for the end?

What will you do if you get behind schedule?

Imagine you are taking an exam and your plan looked like this:

0930	First 10 minutes
0940	Start 1st question.
1010	Start 2nd question.
1040	Start 3rd question.
1110	Start 4th question.
1140	Start last question.
1210	Last 20 minutes
1230	Time up

Imagine the the time is now 1040, and you're only half-way through your second question? What should you do and why? Try **Activity 4**.



If you find you're in the middle of a question when you should be moving on to the next, what should you do? Tick the best option below.

- 1 Carry on with the question – after all you've got some 'spare' time left at the end of the exam.
- 2 Leave a gap, and move straight on to your next question.
- 3 Spend a couple of minutes jotting down in pencil the ideas you need to finish the question, *then* move on to your next one.

Response

- 1 This is dangerous! Remember the danger of attempting too few questions.
- 2 This is sensible – but it may be even better to have chosen option 3.
- 3 This will save you having to spend time tuning-in to the original question when you return to it.

You are likely to be able to return to an unfinished question. If necessary, you could do this in the 'last 20 minutes activities' at the end of the exam, but you may find that later questions under-run – you may not know so much about them.

The last few minutes

What do you think may be the most productive way of using the 20 minutes or so we have saved for the end of the exam? Try **Activity 5**.



Here are three things you could do in the time you've been saving. In which order should you do them? Write '1' beside the most important one, '2' beside the next most important one, and so on.

- a) Tidy up your script, and make it attractive-looking for the examiner.
- b) Read everything you've written, making corrections and additions as you go.
- c) Finish off any incomplete questions.

Response

Here is the best order for you do these things:

- a) Useful, but not crucial. Don't do this until after b) and c).
- b) This is where you can pick up a lot of extra marks. You may be surprised how many changes and additions you can make in a few minutes. This is the first priority.
- c) This can be sensible, but it may be better to do b) first. Whether you do c) first depends on how much you still have left to do to complete your answer and how confident you feel about what you have to write.

Action plan

Write down below things you're determined to do in your next exam, based on your thoughts as you completed this unit.

Timetable

Things to do in the first few minutes:

What to do if I get behind schedule:

What to do in the last few minutes:

What else?

Other units related to this one are:

- 45 *Writing short responses*
- 46 *Handling multiple-choice questions*
- 50 *Reading the exam paper*