Myth Busters: Open Book Exams

Unlike many in-person, invigilated exams, open book exams allow students to use notes, texts, and/or other resources as you work through your test. Some common assumptions about open book exams:

"I don’t need to study as much. I’ll be able to look up what I need in the moment."
"I can just copy the answers out of the text."
"This will be easier than my other tests."

**MYTH #1: You don’t need to study for an open book exam.**

**Fact: Open Book Exams test your ability to apply course material.**

- The instructor knows that you have your notes and text right in front of you, so they are unlikely to ask questions that just call on you to copy information.
- They are much more likely to ask you to **apply, analyze, synthesize, compare/contrast** or evaluate information.
- An open book exam tests whether you understand the “big picture” of the course and how course concepts work together.
  - Ex: you might be given a problem or a scenario and asked to apply concepts from several parts of the course to develop an answer.

- Expect the instructor to look for well-structured and presented arguments or solutions.

**MYTH #2: Open book exams are easier than closed-book/invigilated exams.**

**Fact: This exam is likely to be more challenging than others.**

- The instructor may have **higher expectations for the quality of your answers** and the extent of your critical and analytical thinking, knowing you have course materials available to draw upon.
- It is best to learn your material as thoroughly as you would for any other exam.

**MYTH #3: The professor will build in time for us to look things up.**

**Fact: Time will be shorter than you expect.**

- **Do not count on having extra time** to look up your answers.
- **Know how the exam will run before you begin.**
  - Some online tests do not allow you to go back to previous questions and change your answers, meaning that you need to be sure of your responses before moving on. Carefully read any instructions that you have and if you can, ask questions in advance.
  - If the instructor has given you the option to focus on some questions longer than others (and many won’t, so be prepared for that), answer the questions that you know without extensive referral to materials first.
Know the basic answers and, if necessary, look up an exact formula, a numerical value, or supporting evidence for your answers.

There may be sufficient time to quickly refer to materials, but do not try to learn something new – such as how a formula works, or the relationships between various course concepts – during the exam.

If you have time for review at the end, check your materials more extensively to verify accuracy or to find additional points.

MYTH #4: I can use any resource when taking an open book exam at home.

Fact: Too many resources can create problems.

Using resources to answer questions takes time you may not have (see above).

You could be tempted to bend or break rules. Make sure you are adhering to Ryerson’s standards of Academic Integrity. Consult Ryerson’s Policy 60 (Appendix A in particular) or the Academic Integrity Office’s online student resources for more information.

Professors can be particular. Find out if there are resources or tools you’re expected not to use. If your exam is math-based, you may be tempted to skip steps by using a calculator you’re not supposed to use. Make sure that you can show the work you need to show and not lose marks for relying on a device.

Of the resources allowed, decide what you are going to have at your disposal: Too many things in your work space may distract you, create clutter, and tempt you to waste time by looking up facts unnecessarily.

Organize your resources so that you can find the information you need efficiently, without wasting precious time. For more ideas on how to do this, see “Strategies for Open Book Exams”

Take your permitted resources for a test drive by practicing answering questions of the “apply”, “analyze”, “synthesize”, “compare/contrast” and “evaluate” type.

Previous or practice exams are a good source of questions, or work with classmates to develop practice questions for each other.

Time yourself. People tend to perform differently in a timed setting.

IMPORTANT: Although you may decide to have your written answers on hand to practice questions, do not expect to be asked the same questions and be able to copy entire answers. Your answers need to directly answer the question that is asked, not the somewhat related question that you may have prepared.

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References

