



## The Michael and Kathleen Clem History Writing Center

of the

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## History Exam-Taking Hints

**\*\* Prepare Thoroughly! A Few Suggestions \*\***

### 1. Know the format of the exam

Is the exam comprehensive or is it based on the material covered since your last exam? Will you have a choice of essays? Will there be short answer questions? How much time will you have? (Many of these questions may be answered on your course syllabus already.)

### 2. Organize your study material – don't "cram"

Many students attempt to absorb every word of their lecture notes, textbook, or other class materials, which often leads to frustration, panic, and exhaustion. Instead of trying to memorize every word, try organizing or grouping your study materials and notes into sections to review them. If you do not take good notes, look at the table of contents of your textbook as a way to organize your materials. Professors will often provide "study guides" – use these to help you organize!

### 3. Go over sample questions and try to anticipate questions

If a professor provides sample questions, take the time to work on them. Sample questions are usually a good way to "forecast" what will appear on the actual exam. If your professor does not provide sample questions, try to anticipate what might appear on the exam. What were the major themes of your course? What did you spend a lot of time covering in class? What secondary or primary sources did the class read? The point is not to guess exactly what your professor will ask you, but to review the most important material and not become bogged down.

### 4. Study in a Group

Once you have a number of sample questions, answer them with your classmates. They can give you perspectives and insights that you may have overlooked. Choose your group wisely; you want to work with people with similar study habits. Studying in a group is never an honors violation *before* you receive a copy of the exam. However, for those taking "take-home" exams, consult with your professor whether or not group discussion is permitted *after* you receive the exam.

**\*\*Getting Ready for the Exam\*\***

1. Get a good night's sleep. Exhaustion leads to incoherence and bad grades.
2. Bring one more blue book than you think you will need.
3. Bring extra sharpened pencils, extra leads for mechanical pencils, or extra pens.
4. Bring a watch. Don't count on a working clock being in the room.

## **\*\*Exam Day\*\***

### **1. Relax.**

Oh yeah, easy for us to say. But if you studied you are prepared. To write coherently, however, you have to keep a clear head.

### **2. Plan your time.**

Allot time for each question based on how much the question is worth, and how long you believe it will take you to answer each part of the exam. You don't want to spend 20 minutes agonizing over a short answer worth 5 points and leave yourself just 10 minutes to write a two-page essay worth 50 points!

### **3. READ EACH QUESTION CAREFULLY.**

The most common mistake students make on exams is not answering the question asked. Be sure you understand the question, and know exactly what is being asked. Underline key words or phrases if this helps.

### **4. Develop a thesis.**

A few professors might say that you don't *need* a thesis for the essays on your final exam, but the best papers will still have them. Think about the question, and generate a list of relevant ideas before you plunge in. Then answer the question simply – this is your “thesis” and will become your first paragraph. Sometimes you can develop a thesis by rewording the question.

### **5. Outline and follow through.**

Choose a few examples, illustrations, ideas, or details that will back up your thesis and then develop each point in your essay. This is what you should spend most of your time doing on the exam.

### **6. Use all your time.**

No sense in rushing off to lunch – they aren't going to run out of hotdogs or salads. If you have time “left over,” double-check your answers and read over your exam. If you finish early, it may indicate that your answers are not as complete as they should be.

## **\*\*Things to Avoid\*\***

### **1. Be careful about your word choice.**

Try to avoid unsupported opinions, general ideas, vague feelings, inflated or apologetic language, and unclear terms. On a written exam, never admit that you do not know what you are talking about. Say what you mean, simply, directly, and sincerely.

### **2. Don't skip answers.**

If you do not know the answer to a question, write down what you do know. It's better than leaving the question blank, and sometimes the answer may come to you in the process of writing!

### **3. Don't assume that the facts speak for themselves.**

The point of an essay, as opposed to a short answer, is to demonstrate HOW your examples, illustrations, details, and ideas relate back to your thesis!

### **4. Don't waste time on one question.**

Students often spend copious amounts of time on a question they know very well, and sacrifice time on the questions they are less comfortable with. You should actually do the opposite. If you know a question well, it should take you *less* time to answer, and you can spend more time with the troublesome questions.