

Turn your paper over: the time starts now

With the rapid approach of this year's Higher Specialist Diploma examinations, to be held at the University of Westminster and Glasgow Caledonian University in September, the following provides some timely advice and guidance on the best approach to examination technique.

It is said that a reasonable level of knowledge and good examination technique always ensures a pass, while excellent knowledge and poor examination technique often results in failure. The truth of this statement has been proved time and again, so it is hoped that the following will help anyone taking an examination to improve their technique.

The questions

One of the most common reasons for poor marks is a failure to answer the set question precisely. Many candidates present a very knowledgeable answer but miss the point of the question entirely, and thus the answer proves to be incorrect. So, read all the questions carefully (then read them again) and make sure you understand fully what each is asking and what is required.

Underline the key words in the question. First look for the *process* word (Table 1), which tells you *how* the question must be answered (eg outline, describe, discuss, compare). Instructions such as 'use bullet points', 'construct a table', 'draw a diagram', 'draw a graph' mean exactly what they say. If you do not do as instructed, you will lose marks.

Next, look for the *content* word, which tells you *what* to write about (eg biomedical scientists' training, molecular techniques, diabetes). Finally, look for a particular *context*,

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which tells you if there are any *specific conditions* that must be considered (eg in the last 10 years, in relation to new regulations).

If, for example, you are asked to discuss the use of serum 'rhubarb' testing in relation to new guidelines on rhubarb allergy, simply describing how serum rhubarb testing is carried out will not gain maximum marks because the question has not been answered fully. Discussion of the new guidelines alone will not represent a complete answer, nor will listing, without further discussion, the different methods available for determining serum rhubarb. The question requires an informed discussion of how serum rhubarb testing is used to provide a diagnostic result, and how this may be affected or modified by the new guidelines.

Use of time

Attempt all the questions you are asked to answer. If you are required to answer four questions, each will normally attract 25% of the total marks available. If you answer only three questions then you can gain a maximum of just 75%, however well you answer each question, and it is unusual for any answer to attract maximum marks.

Do not make the common mistake of spending significantly more time on the questions that you think you know a lot about. You should be able to answer these well and score maximum marks in the allotted time. You must ensure that you leave sufficient time to make a reasonable attempt at the questions you know less about.

So, spend an equal amount of time on questions that attract equal marks, and try to write sparingly. You are not writing a novel, so concentrate on the key facts.

Choose the correct questions to answer

When a choice of questions is available (eg answer four out of six), too many candidates glance at the questions, spot one they like and start to write immediately. Do not think that you have to spend every minute scribbling furiously because the time allotted is short. Time spent at the beginning in deciding which questions to answer and organising your thoughts is time well spent.

Even with short-answer questions (where choice is available), it is vital to spend a few minutes deciding which to answer and how to

'Consider tackling those questions you know a lot about last, to avoid spending too much time on them'

answer them. Shorter questions often demand more time spent on planning at the beginning, to ensure that you have sufficient time to put down all the facts necessary and thus avoid wasting time writing about irrelevances.

A simple way to choose which questions to answer is to read through each one in turn. Once you understand what a question is asking, put a mark above it for every main area you can think of that you could write about. Do this for every question and the ones with the most marks above them are the ones to answer.

Plan your answer

Never simply read a question and then immediately start to write an answer. This leads to a second-rate attempt. Always make a brief plan of the answer, concentrating on the 'fundamentals' and key points, which should be organised in a logical order. Even questions that allow only very limited time in which to answer are worthy of a minute or two of planning. This ensures that you do not run out of time while frantically scribbling an introduction.

With longer questions, you should spend up to a quarter of the allocated time in planning the answer. It is much easier to write an answer based on a plan, which also helps to avoid pointless rambling and repetition. Do not try to include too much fine detail unless the question demands it – key points will score more marks than esoteric facts.

General presentation

Write legibly and ensure that your statements make sense. Try to ensure that your handwriting does not degenerate into unreadable scribble, even when time is short. If the examiner cannot read your writing, or make sense of the points you are trying to make, then you will not gain any marks.

Practise writing clearly if your natural handwriting is poor. Find a pen that fits your hand, feels good and writes with a smooth flow. Practise writing about topics without repetition or 'waffle'.

Try to avoid using jargon, acronyms and contractions of words unless they are in very common usage. While it may be helpful to use abbreviations, always define them when first used. Do not assume, for example, that the examiner will know that 'HI' stands for *Haemophilus influenzae*, simply because it is a common abbreviation in your laboratory. Also, do not over-emphasise local laboratory practice; be aware of techniques you may never have used.

Finally, always remember that an examination is a formal assessment so please

Table 1. Process words in examination questions.

Process word	What you must do
Assess	Judge the worth of
Compare	Draw attention to similarities between two things, but also mention any differences
Contrast	Draw attention to differences between two things
Criticise	Judge the merit of the issue, with reasons, and include both favourable and unfavourable comments
Describe	Give sufficient detail to ensure the reader understands the subject, going from general to specific
Discuss	Expound views on a subject, and put the arguments for and against – do not take sides
Evaluate	Judge the value of the issue
Explain	Make the issue clear, in detail
Illustrate	Make the issue clear by description, and include diagrams or examples if possible
Justify	Demonstrate the correctness of the issue
List	List
Outline	Include only the essentials and main points
Relate	Establish the connection between

do not answer questions using 'text'. While it is quite acceptable to send text messages via your mobile phone, examiners will not be impressed by the imaginative use of this form of syntax in the answer to an examination question.

Presentation aids

Pay attention to presentation. A messy, badly written and poorly presented answer with no paragraphs, headings or apparent logical progression is extremely difficult to read and understand, let alone mark. Use paragraphs and headings to separate your answer into sensible sections. These could be related to the key points in your plan.

Bullet points can provide a good way of setting out a lot of information quickly and are useful when time is short. When using bullet points, ensure that each point contains enough information to make sense, otherwise it is simply a list. Unless a list is requested, providing one will not answer a question that requires an outline or a brief description; however, providing a series of statements or arguments as bullet-pointed items may do so quite effectively.

Use tables, charts, diagrams or graphs whenever possible because they can save a lot of time and result in a very clear answer. Refer to any diagrams etc in the written answer but do not duplicate the information in them, as this just wastes time. Diagrams and tables etc should have titles and contain

enough information to ensure that they are understandable. However, do not draw a picture or diagram in an answer unless it conveys useful information.

Pay attention to spelling. While it is unreasonable to expect that every word in an answer will be spelled correctly, specific terminology related to the subject (eg medical terms and the names of microorganisms, equipment and diseases) should be correct, using the appropriate nomenclature rather than the vernacular. If you cannot spell words associated with your particular discipline then you have not revised properly.

Practice makes perfect

No one would dream of revising the Highway Code and then taking their driving test without practical experience of controlling a car. The same is true for examinations. So, practise answering written questions under examination conditions as much as possible before submitting yourself for the real thing.

Practise answering questions in a similar style to those in the examination for which you are revising (use past papers if they are available). Make summaries or plans on particular topics, which may help you identify particular strengths or weaknesses that you can exploit or correct. You may get a similar question in the examination, which would be a result.

Finally, try to be honest with yourself long before you sit the examination. How good do you really think you are? The only way to find out is to try it out beforehand. You should be able to find someone willing to give you an independent opinion on the quality of your answer. Then, if you find yourself lacking, do something about it.

Importantly, don't panic or get sidetracked; remain calm, focus on the key words in each question and employ sensible time management on all questions... and most of all, good luck.

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