

POST GRADUATE MEDICAL EDUCATION

HOW TO APPROACH POSTGRADUATE EXAMS

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Success in examination requires forward planning and a positive state of mind. Fear needs to be cast aside, as it can paralyze creativity and block recall. Therefore, an affirmation that the examination will be negotiated favorably is necessary. For this, one needs to know the course material, the examiner's expectations and the context of exam/specialty training.¹ A trainee usually focuses on the knowledge and format of exam, and often forgets examiner's perspective. This creates gaps in the information and learning process. Trainee should be aware of what he knows and what he needs to know. Discussions conducted at an institutional level with supervisors are one way to ascertain the examiner's perspective, since one can amend learning habits based on feedback from those committed to the growth of examinees.

One has to be cognizant of his studying style. To achieve proficiency, few hours should be assigned to reading and writing on a daily basis. Some people like to study in small groups while others prefer to study alone. It is imperative to identify one's preference early on, and then stick to it, thus preventing changes at the eleventh hour. Identify the useful resources for the exam early on. Though an exam format may require consulting many resources, it is best to stick to the most recommended ones. Taking notes after thorough reading (of articles and books) can benefit the learner, since it allows one to combine material sought from different resources. It also helps to get a grip of larger concepts. In-depth understanding of facts takes time, patience and thinking through. For this, there are multiple creative or mind mapping techniques to make the concepts interesting to retain. Some individuals use flash cards, mnemonics and visual rhymes to make the process of learning a worthwhile experience.²

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Discipline in one's study plan, like other aspects of life, makes thing easier. Some trainees do get distracted due to one reason or another and lose track of their goal. The distractions can be academic or non-academic. Proper implementation of schedule is achieved when one is not

predisposed to procrastination. Some would argue that timing of the study during the day is the ultimate factor in self-discipline. Human brain is in its most active state from 5 to 8 in the morning and 7 to 11 in the evening. Studying during this period of time might have the maximum retention power. It is equally important to chart one's sleep schedule. Eight hours is the recommended time.³ Sleeping too much or too less may fatigue the brain. It is best to commit one's quality time to studying on a daily basis.⁴

It is best to start studying (practicing the requisite skills) few months ahead of exams. Experience tells us that other commitments generally fall in place. The students with family commitments will benefit substantially from such time retaining maneuver. It is often not a good idea to start studying at the eleventh hour with so much to cover, thus depriving oneself of good sleep, nutrition and healthy entertainment. This is extremely critical if one is at verge of taking an important exam. A majority of examinees tend to overlook this aspect and compromise their "immunity" to take the pressure of examinations.

When attempting a theory paper it is best to block out few minutes initially to prepare an outline of response you intend to make.

Getting anxious and keyed up during "testing times" is natural. One needs to adopt healthy coping strategies on regular basis to overcome the stress. It is necessary to remain composed to get optimum performance. The Internet has many extracts available to aid relaxation. Relaxing exercises, guided imagery, and virtual maneuvers are some common techniques employed in this regard.⁵ Regular practice of such exercises improves mental capacity. On the exam day one has to be calm and composed to brace oneself for his best mode of discourse.

When attempting a theory paper it is best to block out few minutes initially to prepare an outline of response you intend to make. It makes sense to attempt the questions you have command on at the initial instance. Moreover, it is logical to divide the time for each question based on the expected details. It helps to read between the lines, especially when attempting a case scenario. The mere socio-demographic description is a giveaway for potential risk factors requiring specific responses. One has to pay close attention to the phraseology of the question. The word "define" means that one is expected to give a standard definition with proper reference. Contrarily, if the question

asks you to “evaluate” then the examiner intend to know your thoughts on the subject, giving points in favor and against an argument with a well justified conclusion. It is best to follow the rules of academic writing when giving a written response.⁶

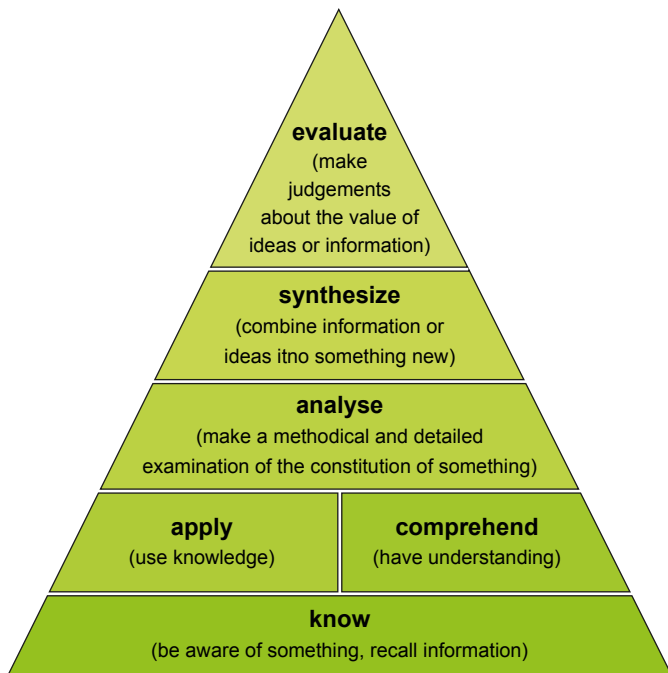


Figure: Students Handbook, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, 2012

The cognitive assessment in an examination implies that the examinee first figure out the requisite case and answer accordingly. Just as patients don't present to physicians stating their diagnosis, so does one has to decipher the key question(s) in a case scenario. The assessment of psychomotor skills also demands that one examines the patient in a relaxed, systematic manner as if it were a matter of routine. The focus of examination will vary based on the given command. It also needs to be done in a calm, confident manner that is reassuring to the real or simulated patient.

The motivation to study may come internally or externally. Focusing on the bigger picture, regardless of the distractions and irritants in the immediate environment, helps maintain concentration. It is essential to discern one's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.⁷ Polishing one's strengths and modifying one's weaknesses not only open avenues of opportunities, but supplement one's belief in his ability.

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