



UNSW
SYDNEY

Open Book and Take Home Exams

What are open book exams?

Open book exams allow you to take notes, texts or resource materials into an exam situation. They test your ability to find and apply information and knowledge, so are often used in subjects requiring direct reference to written materials, like law statutes, statistics or acts of parliament.

Open book exams usually come in two forms:

- Traditional sit-down / limited-time exams, with varying degrees of access to resources and references.
- Take home exams—open book exams you do at home. Question(s) are handed out, answers are attempted without help from others, and the exam is returned within a specified period of time (often the next day).

What kinds of material can be used?

The materials you can take into an Open Book exam can vary. Some restrict the type of materials (e.g. formula sheets and tables or a limited number of texts), others may be totally unrestricted (any quantity of any material).

Materials might be:

- your notes
- readings, reference materials or textbooks
- equipment like calculators, drafting tools etc.

Materials used in Take Home exams are usually unrestricted. Check your course guide or with your lecturer to find out what you can use. The main

restriction for Take Home exams is that they must be your work—you must attempt them by yourself without any help from others.

Why are some exams 'open book'?

Because they test for more than just rote-learning. At university, simply memorising and repeating information is not enough to get you a good mark. Higher education is supposed to equip you with intellectual abilities and skills. Open Book exams test your ability to quickly find relevant information and then to understand, analyse, apply knowledge and think critically.

What kinds of questions will an open book exam have?

Open Book Exams don't test your memory. They test your ability to find and use information for problem solving, and to deliver well-structured and well-presented arguments and solutions.

Open Book exam questions usually require you to apply knowledge, and they may be essay-style questions or involve problem solving or delivering solutions. The style of question depends on the faculty or school setting the exam. For example in Law, the questions may set up a hypothetical fact situation that you will need to discuss.

Misconceptions about open book exams

1) Open Book exams are a breeze

Open Book exams are not an easy option. Answering the questions well requires more than just copying information straight from texts. For example, having access to a textbook can stop you from giving a wrong answer if you can't remember a fact or formula, but just getting that fact correct won't get you good marks. In Open Book exams, it's how you locate, apply and use the information that is important.

2) You don't have to study

Probably the biggest misconception about Open Book exams is that there is no need to study anything. However, you should study just as you would

for any other exam. Having books and notes to refer to might mean you don't have to memorise as much information, but you still need to be able to apply it effectively.

This means you must fully understand and be familiar with the content and materials of your course so you can find and use the appropriate information. In Open Book exams, you need to quickly find the relevant information in the resources you have. If you don't study you won't be able to—you won't know where it is.

3) You can just copy straight from the book!

You can't copy chunks of text directly from textbooks or notes. This is plagiarism. In Open Book exams, the resource materials are made available to you, so you are expected to do more than just reproduce them. You must be able to find, interpret and apply the information in your sources to the exam questions. You usually need to reference as well, just as you would for any other assignment.

4) The more materials the better!

Don't get carried away and overload with materials and resources in the exam. Only take what you need. Stacks of books won't necessarily guarantee your performance, and you won't have time for extensive reading. Too many materials can end up distracting you and crowding up your work space. Carefully select your materials and organise them for quick reference.