

How to Create Open Book Exams

What Is an Open Book Exam?

An "open book examination" is an assessment method designed in a way that allows students to refer to class notes, textbooks, or other approved material while answering questions. An open book exam can also mean that students are provided with the exam questions prior to writing the exam.

Why Use Them?

The main premise for open book exams is that teachers can create questions that require students to answer in more critical and analytical ways. This encourages high-order thinking skills in students, as compared to closed book or traditional exams that tend to encourage memorization.

What Are the Pitfalls?

The main issues that arise when making use of open book exams is that teachers may not know how to create effective exam questions that require students to apply their knowledge through analysis and critical thinking. Students may be lulled into a false sense of security and fail to properly prepare for an open book exam. Students may falsely assume that the exam will be easy, and they will be able to find all the answers in the textbook or on their memory aid.

Tips When Designing Open Book Exams

Questions in open book exams need to be created to assess the interpretation and application of knowledge, comprehension skills, and critical thinking skills rather than only knowledge recall.

Here are some tips:

- Use case studies and scenarios that require students to apply critical thinking skills
- Create clear and unambiguous questions to limit time spent interpreting the question so students can spend their time making use of their textbook or memory aid to effectively answer the questions
- Devise questions that require students to apply and make use of the information from their textbook or notes rather than simply requiring them to locate and re-write this information
- Design your questions and overall exam paper with the learning outcomes in mind i.e. what skills and knowledge are you assessing?

How to Phrase Open Book Exam Questions

Here are some example questions and starters:

Type of Question	Students Are Asked To...	Example Questions and Starters
Knowing and Remembering	Recall knowledge of subject matter relevant to the discussion.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What, where, who, when, where...? • How many...? • List... • Describe... • Define...
Understanding	Demonstrate understanding by constructing meaning from information.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In your own words, • Explain how... • What did X mean when...? • Give an example of...
Applying	Apply knowledge and understanding to a particular task or problem.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would you use...? • What examples can you find to...? • How would you solve ___ using what you've learned? • What would happen if...?
Analyzing	Examine different concepts and make distinctions between them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the parts or features of...? • What are the competing arguments within...? • Why is X different to Y? Compare and contrast... • What is the relationship between A and B?
Evaluating	Make judgements about concepts or ideas.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is most important/effective? • Which method is best? • Which is the strongest argument?
Creating	Develop new ideas from what they know and understand.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would you design a...? • What alternatives are there to...? • What changes would you make? • What would happen if...? Suppose you could ___ what would you do? • How would you evaluate ...? • Can you formulate a theory for...?

Adapted from "A Guide for Academics – Open Book Exams" from the University of Newcastle:

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