

How to answer exam questions

A. The functions of university course exams

- you cannot answer exam questions efficiently if you are not aware of their function!
- I. *To examine your knowledge*
 - no successful answering of exam questions without learning...
 - however, do not overestimate the importance of this function!
 - no "abstract" presentation of your knowledge - only precisely there where it is asked for!
 - II. *To examine your deeper understanding of the subject matter*
 - because only this will qualify you as an expert
 - in particular theoretical backgrounds but also practical problems in the field
 - can only be assessed correctly by highly qualified examiners but will be in particular important for them
 - does not require long but well thought-out answers
 - III. *To examine important skills with regard to the subject matter*
 - analytical skills (think sharply)
 - transfer skills (use your knowledge in different contexts)
 - problem-solving skills (solve problems constructively and in line with the relevant rules, principles and values)
 - the skill to apply theoretical knowledge in practice
 - IV. *To examine your presentation skills*
 - the skill to present your ideas in a clear and logic, dogmatically consistent structure
 - the skill to present your reasoning in a clear and logic, comprehensible line of thoughts
 - the skill to present all your information and ideas clearly and neatly arranged, allowing quick and easy orientation
 - the skill to formulate information and ideas in a in a sober and precise, scientifically correct, yet understandable way
 - the skill to make yourself understood without stealing too much precious time of the reader
 - last but not least: the professional discipline to first draft your text carefully before starting to write it
 - V. *To examine the achievement of the expected learning outcomes defined for your study program*
 - check carefully any information on this on the program's website/documents

B. The preparation of the exam

- when learning do not focus on details but on structure and fundamentals, understanding and orientation
- *study the course materials thoroughly*; also consider *other materials* (e.g. *internet resources*) to which the lecturer refers
- ask the lecturer questions (in class, via e-mail/WhatsApp, in his office) if there are important issues you did not understand
- prepare neatly all documents and materials you are allowed to bring with you in case of an open book exam
 - note that in legal education you should always be allowed to have the text of the law with you!
- take drinks and snacks with you (in particular snacks with glucose and lecithin that support brain activities)

C. The preparation of the writing of the answers in the exam

- I. *The need to prepare the answers before writing them down*
 - never start immediately to write down the answers to the exam questions!
 - a very serious but common strategic mistake (unfortunately also common at MNU)
 - insufficient preparation before the writing down usually leads to
 - poorly structured (if not chaotic), incomplete and subsequently complemented or corrected and therefore confusing answers
 - wordy, non-focused and poorly weighted answers which cause a higher reading effort and annoy the examiner
 - note that any subsequent changes to your text demonstrate a lack of planning and thus of academic professionalism!
- II. *Exact analysis of the exam questions*
 - analyse the questions thoroughly - otherwise you cannot answer them in a targeted, precise and concise manner
 - make sure that you *identify all sub-questions!*
 - avoid misunderstandings that will make your answers useless!
 - *avoid any redundant remarks* not asked for, since they will affect the grading! (→ see infra, D.I.)
 - pay attention to a special notice that may elucidate the question

III. Brainstorming and drawing up of a draft outline

- gather spontaneous ideas on a separate sheet of paper during the analysis of the questions
 - this prevents that important thoughts and ideas get lost
- set up a framework in the form of an *exactly tuned outline of your answer* on the separate sheet of paper
 - focus on an *appropriate, clear and logic, dogmatically consistent structure* and a *comprehensible line of thoughts*, which allows easy orientation; note that a chaotic or inconsistent order of thoughts can make your answer useless!
 - split up complex questions into separate sub-questions, which may be easier to handle
 - plan the presentation with the help of the draft outline, noting all elements (information, reasoning etc.) at the right place
- update the draft outline constantly, also later during the writing process
- *plan thoroughly* in order to avoid subsequent complementations or corrections that leave a bad impression

IV. Time management

- allow 10 to 15 minutes (in a 90 minutes exam) for the drawing up of the draft outline - it will pay off!
- plan in the draft outline the amount of time you want to spend on each question and each aspect within
 - this shall prevent wasting time on not so important aspects at the beginning and missing it for important parts at the end
 - *plan with regard to the points offered for each question* but also to your skills and knowledge
 - allow for at least 5 minutes reserve
- check later frequently if there is still enough time and correct your time planning realistically at an early stage

D. The writing down

I. Answering the questions precisely and concisely

- make sure that your text answers exactly - and only (!) - what is asked for (→ see supra, C.II.)
 - make sure that it *answers all sub-questions* contained in the questions
 - but be aware that *redundant remarks* on topics not asked for dilute your answers, cause unnecessary additional work for the examiner and therefore will *result in a deduction of points*
 - resist the temptation to simply write down what you have learnt! (a very serious but common mistake at MNU)

II. Focusing on the main aspects

- avoid an imbalanced presentation!
- be aware that your focusing demonstrates your ability to distinguish the more and less important aspects of the topic

III. Structuring the text by well-coordinated, precise headlines

- often ignored but important to allow quick and easy orientation
- use a clear and consistent system for numbering the parts and sub-parts of your answers
- unstructured long text blocks are unacceptable in academic writing, also in exam papers!
- within the answer of the same question, the *headlines must fit together and form a logically and dogmatically consistent system*
 - unprecise, merely associative headlines, like in a journalist article, are unsuitable for an academic text
 - if you want to introduce a new sub-level, there must be at least two sub-parts (no "1.1" without "1.2")
- practical tip: start the answer for each exam question with a new sheet of paper; this avoids confusion and allows to write down the answers in a different order than their later arrangement

IV. Exact reasoning

- reveal, which legal methods you apply in your legal reasoning and why (legal interpretation, analogy, further development of law? Which method of legal interpretation?)

V. Objective and precise style of writing

- essential for any legal writing - also in exam papers and also in foreign languages!
- formulate as exactly as possible, with precise terms and smart and correct use of prepositions, conjunctions, verbs etc.
- use a consistent terminology within the same text
 - in particular: use the same English translation for the same foreign legal term within the same text
- do *not* use emotional expressions, strong language or *exaggerations* ("certainly", "of course", "without doubts", "very" etc.)
 - they do not compensate for shortcomings in your reasoning but rather point to them!
- do *not* use *subjective style* ("we...", "I..." etc.) in any scientific or legal writing!
- specify legal norms as exactly as possible (article, section, sub-section, no., lit. etc.)
- underline important keywords (because many examiners are searching for them...)
- formulate in your own words - never "copy and paste", not even from the course materials!

VI. Appealing form

- form does matter in an exam paper - for many examiners it proves the professional sovereignty of the writer
- avoid confusing addenda and side notes since they may irritate the examiner
- *write legibly* even in a hurry, since readability problems are at the expense of the student

E. The final check

- reserve 5 minutes for a final check - you will lose little time but may gain much!
- Does your text really answer the questions and does it become apparent? Does it answer all sub-questions?
- Is something important missing?
- Have you processed all important ideas noted at the beginning on the separate sheet of paper during the brainstorming?
- Have you arranged all sheets of paper in the right order and numbered them correctly?