


ACING EXAM SEASON

By

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Tsatsi Mnisi & Katlego Mahlo



**Tloga tloga e tloga
kgale, modisa wa
kgomo o tswa natso
sakeng.**

Get going as early as
possible, the herder leaves
with the cows from the kraal.

Setswana proverb



EXAM SEASON IS COMING...

You've made it through hundreds of lectures, dozens of practicals and tutorials, and many class tests and assignments. This, on its own, is an incredible achievement and you should be proud of yourself for all the hard work and dedication you have invested so far. But your mission is not yet complete. You are about to enter into the most important part of the semester: exam season.



How you approach your exams will be a determining factor in your academic success this semester. Some students end up failing courses despite performing well throughout the semester and achieving a good class record. In other cases, students who have underperformed during the semester are able to recover and pass their courses. In this chapter, we'll describe what you can expect from your first exam season at UCT and discuss what you can do to best prepare yourself to do well in all your courses.

WHAT HAPPENS IN EXAM SEASON?

UCT has two main exam seasons (one after each semester) and each exam season has two parts: consolidation week and exams. There are a number of differences between



normal term time and exam season; for example, there are no lectures, tutorials or practicals during exam season. If you understand these differences and know how to manage your time, you can be well prepared for your exams.

Consolidation week

Consolidation week occurs after the end of lectures, before the start of exams. This week is meant to provide you with time to prepare for your exams, without the stress of lectures, tuts, pracs and assessments. Don't get caught in the trap of feeling like you have a huge amount of time before your first exam! For many students, consolidation week passes in the blink of an eye, and they find themselves wondering where all their time has gone. Remind yourself about the purpose of consolidation week and have a clear idea of how much work you need to get through during this week.

While consolidation week offers you uninterrupted time to focus on preparing and studying for your exams, this period can also be stressful and impact your mental health. Many students struggle with the anxiety that is associated with their impending exams. Also, without lectures and other modes of contact class time, there aren't as many opportunities for social interaction and peer support. The combination of studying for four whole courses in a short period of time, along with not having a structured lecture timetable, can put students at risk of falling into depression. You therefore need to make sure that you are prioritising your personal well-being while you are studying.

The section in this chapter called '**Start preparing now**' will help you do this.

The section called '**Manage your well-being**' will help you do this.



Exam period

In the first semester, the exam period lasts three weeks: typically from the last week of May until the second week of June. The **UCT examinations website** contains all the information you need, including exam notices and your exam timetable. Spend a few minutes exploring the site to familiarise yourself with the kind of information you can find there. In particular, note that there is an Examinations Policy Manual and Deferred Exams Guidelines.

It's important to check your exam timetable regularly until the final version is published. A preliminary version is published in March (and at the end of September for the second semester). This timetable will likely change until it is finalised by the Exams Office, which usually happens in the first week of May for first semester exams. Figure 1 shows an example of a UCT exam timetable. There is information on the dates, times, and durations of your exams, as well as information on the exam venue and your designated seat number. For each exam that you will be writing, it is important that you calendarise the date and venue, as well as your seat number. If you have never been to your assigned venue before, it is useful to visit the building and specific room before your exam. This will familiarise you with the venue and prevent you from getting lost or being late on the day of your exam, thus avoiding unnecessary stress.

There is information on **deferred exams** at the end of this chapter.

June 2024

Monday, 3 June	12:30 PM
MAM1004F Paper 1	
Mathematics 1004	
Reading time: 0min	
Writing time: 3hrs	
Total duration: 3hrs	
Sports Centre 3	
Seat#: J33	

Snapshot of a first-semester UCT exam timetable



The end of exams

Your vacation will start immediately after your last exam. For many UCT students, this will be the first time that you go home since arriving at UCT. In the next chapter, we'll give you some advice about managing the transition back home.

Note that UCT residences expect you to leave your accommodation within 72 hours of your last exam. You should make travel arrangements in advance to avoid last-minute stress and increased ticket prices. Start the process of arranging money to fund your travels early. Asking family or friends to assist you with the necessary funds in advance will also help you (and them) to plan for this expense. You should also start thinking about whether you will need to organise storage for some of your belongings.

What are the main differences between class tests and exams?

Exams are different from class tests in two main respects. Firstly, the university rules governing exams are stricter. For example, your lecturer is not allowed to let you make up a missed exam, although that is possible for class tests (depending on the subject).

Secondly, although, most of your exams will follow a similar structure and format to your class tests, exams are usually longer and examine all content covered during the course. Some exams focus more on longer essay-based questions or questions that require higher-level thinking (in terms of Bloom's taxonomy), so it's always a good idea to look through past exam papers to familiarise yourself with the structure and types of questions.

If you find yourself without any means to get home, please contact the Science Faculty Student Support Human for help (mohammed.kajee@uct.ac.za)

You can ask a friend to store your stuff or arrange with your res. If you can't find anywhere to store your belongings, contact the Science Faculty Student Support Human (mohammed.kajee@uct.ac.za)



Source: Adapted from *Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching*, CC BY



HOW TO THRIVE IN EXAM SEASON

Now that you are familiar with the basics of exam season, you are ready to start preparing for your exams. To successfully navigate exam season, you need to draw on all the knowledge and skills you have gained over this past semester. You can combine all the tips, tricks, and techniques given in previous chapters with what you know about yourself to come up with a plan that gives you the best chance of acing your exams. This section provides some tips to help you sail through exam season.

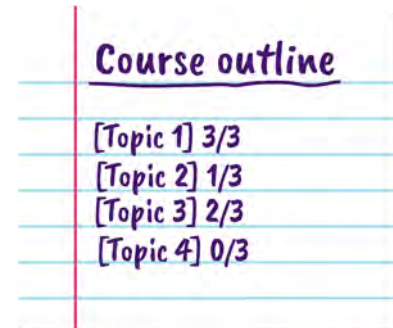


Start preparing now

An early start on your exam preparation will help you to feel confident when exams begin. You are probably still quite busy with lectures, practicals, tutorials and even some tests, but you should still try to allocate a few hours a week to exam preparation. Here are things you can do to get started:



- Get a list of the topics of the course from the course handout or Amathuba. (This gives you an overview of the course.)
- Give each topic a mark out of three to show how confident you are about that topic. (This helps you identify where you should spend your time.)
- Collect and organise your summaries and study notes.
- Make a list of specific things you need to do, for example:
 - Ensure that you are up to date with course content.
 - For topics where you don't feel confident, you can watch the lecture recordings or go through the lecture slides or relevant sections in your textbook.
 - Practice past test and exam paper questions, using the given time limits (this helps you get used to the speed that you need to work at in the exam). If you discover that you can't finish in the given time, then you'll know to omit the most difficult questions when you write the exam. If you never finish in time, you should consult Disability Services to see whether you can get a concession for extra time in tests and exams.
- Draw up a calendar and a daily schedule using the advice provided in the next section.





Manage your time

During exam season, time management is more important than ever! Without the usual routine of lectures, tutorials and practicals, you are left entirely in charge of your own time. While this can be a relief (since you have no other responsibilities, assessments, or distractions), the unstructured freedom can also be a potential obstacle. It's easy to get sucked into a new TV series or find yourself paralysed at the thought of how much work you need to do.

Now is a good time to remind yourself of the six principles in the '**Next-level time management for succeeding at UCT**' chapter (take responsibility, practice self-care, keep your goals in sight, prioritise, plan, work smart) and the practical strategies for implementing these time management principles, such as accountability partners and anti-procrastination strategies. A calendar, daily schedule and to-do list will help you use your time effectively.

The image shows a collage of study planning tools. At the top is a calendar for a 'Consolidation week' with columns for Mon, Tues, Wed, Thurs, Fri, Sat, and Sun. The calendar has several entries: 'Maths exam 8 am' with two red exclamation marks on Monday; 'Biol 5 pm' on Friday; 'Phy 12:3' on Wednesday; and 'Last exam 8 am' circled in red on Tuesday. Overlaid on the calendar are two sticky notes. The first sticky note is titled 'To-do today' and lists: 'Study maths' (checked), 'Go for a run', 'Shower', 'Eat lunch', and 'Study more maths'. The second sticky note is titled 'Daily schedule' and lists a routine from 7am to 10pm: Wake, Study, Lunch, Study, Exercise, Supper, Study, Relax, and Sleep.

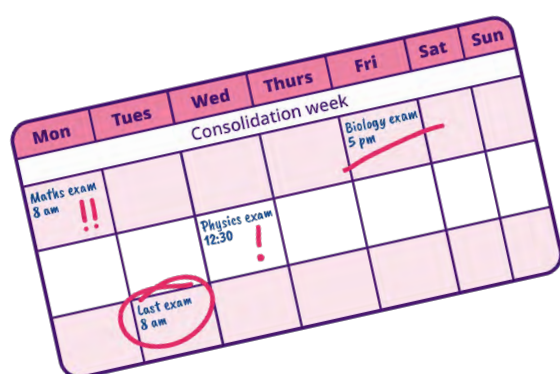
Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
Consolidation week						
Maths exam 8 am !!				Biol 5 pm		
		Phy 12:3				
	Last exam 8 am					

To-do today

- ☒ Study maths
- ☐ Go for a run
- ☐ Shower
- ☐ Eat lunch
- ☐ Study more maths

Daily schedule

7am	Wake
8-12am	Study
12-1pm	Lunch
1-5pm	Study
5-6pm	Exercise
6pm	Supper
7pm	Study
8pm	Relax
9pm	Sleep



Calendar

You need a page where you can see the whole exam season at one glance. Start by adding your exam dates to your calendar. It's best to stick this page where you can see it daily, and cross off the days as they pass.

Daily schedule

The first trick for success is to spend enough time 'on task' (studying). Draw up a daily timetable that gives you 9–11 hours of study time per day. If you stick to the same working hours as during the term, then your mind is already used to this programme. Don't worry yet what you will do each day – just commit to your working hours. You also need to prioritise your well-being and make time for healthy activities that keep your brain happy, like exercising or hanging out with friends. And don't forget the vital role that sleep plays in learning!

Daily to-do list

The second trick for success is to spend your study time productively. You should have an overall list of what you need to do (see the section entitled 'Start preparing now'). At the start of each day, make a specific list of what you want to do that day, taking the following into account:

- Your exam timetable should guide your list; for example, you may want to dedicate more time to studying for the exam you write first. Make sure that you don't neglect your other subjects, though!
- Focus more time on subjects that have a lot of content or on subjects that you struggle with. This will allow you to spend more time in areas where you need it most.



Make sure that time goes to where it is needed most and even though most of that would be studying, create time to rest and also some 'you' time.

Blessing Gumbu

Practice a lot, both alone and with others.

Kenneth Freeman

Do what works best for you. Only you know when you're at your best and can tackle challenging tasks.

Kenneth Freeman

- Prioritise! The reality is that you don't have enough time to do everything you would like to. Choose tasks that will give you the most advantage in your exams.
- Look at how different topics are weighted in the exam and prioritise accordingly.
- It helps to break down big tasks into smaller tasks so that they become more manageable.
- Passive reading is mostly a waste of time. You need to practice retrieving and applying information, since that is what you will need to do in the exams.
- There's good advice in the 'hacking' sections in the chapter on 'How to succeed in your first BSc tests'.

Once you have your daily to-do list, get down to it, taking advantage of how your brain works:

- Your brain responds well to novelty, so regularly change subjects or type of activity.
- When you get stuck, take a break so that your brain shifts into **diffuse thinking** mode.
- Spaced repetition (possibly using flashcards) is more effective than trying to learn something all in one go.
- You may find it helpful to start with something that puts you in the right frame of mind for studying, such as a breathing exercise, prayer, meditation or other study ritual.



In this section we've given lots of practical strategies for effective study. We end with two suggestions. The first is to find an accountability partner, especially if you have difficulty sticking to a schedule or list – perhaps you and your accountability partner can agree to work together in the same space to keep each other on track? The second is to remember that small things can make a big difference to your state of mind and how you approach studying. For example, having a dedicated, separate space to study can help you to separate your study time from your relaxation time.

Your study environment matters!

Study spaces

UCT provides a number of study spaces for students to use throughout the year. During exam season, there are venues that operate during the evenings.

- **Science Learning Centre** in Chris Hani Building: Access to all Science students 7am – 10pm.
- **Hlanganani 24/7** in Chancellor Oppenheimer Library: Access to all UCT students 24/7 (after-hours entry from the North Staircase next to Steve Biko Building).
- **Brand van Zyl Law Library:** Access to all UCT students 5pm – 8am.
- **Avenue Road Residence Dining Hall:** Access for residence students 24/7 except mealtimes (open 9–11.30am; 2.30–5pm; 8.30pm–6:30am).

Note that exam venues may not be used as study spaces, as these venues need to be prepared for the exam sessions. These venues will be clearly marked as exam venues.



Manage your well-being

The exam period is usually the most stressful time of the year. Students not only deal with a mountain of content to get through, but may also be plagued by fear of failure and the anxiety of letting themselves (and their families) down. This constant mental strain can directly impact their ability to study and, if left unchecked, can even cause physical illness or a mental breakdown. It is, therefore, really important that you prioritise your well-being and take care of yourself. This involves addressing all aspects of your well-being, which includes your physical, mental, spiritual, and social health. It also means that if you realise that you are struggling, you should reach out for help before it is too late. Below are some key tips to help you stay healthy and happy during exam season.

*Let your degree find you
still standing!*

Orateng Mogadingwane

Physical health

- Make sure that you are eating a healthy and balanced diet. Try to incorporate 'brain foods' into your meals.
- Plan to maintain a regular sleep schedule and aim to get a minimum of seven hours of sleep each day.
- Try to do at least one physical activity per day. This can include going for a run or to the gym, but even a leisurely walk around a sports field can be immensely beneficial.

Brain foods are things like nuts, fish and eggs.

Mental health

- Taking care of your physical health is the first step in improving your mental health.
- Manage your stress levels by sticking to your plan and not overworking.
- Dedicate some time each day to doing things that you enjoy or find relaxing.

Students that battle with procrastination or ADHD are especially at risk of struggling during exam season. In light of this, it is really important to plan carefully how you will spend your time each day during exam season.



- Talk to someone or write about it.
- Just breathe. You've got this!

Spiritual health

- Taking time each day to meditate or pray can help to ground you and remind you of what is really important to you.
- Maintaining your weekly spiritual practices, like attending your church / mosque / temple or campus-based religious activities or youth groups, can help you to feel a sense of support and community.

Social health

- Just because you are studying for exams doesn't mean that you should neglect other aspects of your life.
- Try to make time to hang out with friends or meet up with study mates to help you to study.
- Talk to each other about what you are feeling. You will realise that you aren't alone in what you may be feeling.

Checklist

- Exercised today?
- Healthy diet?
- Enough sleep last night?
- Daily exam routine?
- To-do list for today?
- Overall well-being?



MY STORY

Study tips

Katlego Mahlo

UCT graduate



- It's important that you know when best your brain retains knowledge – it could be during the day, in the morning or the evening. Once you know, stick to the pattern.
- It's a cliché, but practice makes perfect. Make sure you practice whatever concepts you need.
- Make sure you understand the content. Ask your lecturer and fellow classmates questions to help you clarify concepts before consolidation week starts. Make full use of your tutorials.
- Do past papers as you study the content. It helps you to retain the knowledge.
- It's okay to take a break.
- Don't give up. Be resilient even if you feel like you don't understand anything. Things tend to make sense at the end.
- Don't feel down if you don't do well in tests. Exams tend to be easier.
- Learn to reward yourself with something nice after studying.



WHAT TO EXPECT ON EXAM DAY

We suggest that you double-check your timetable the day before your exam to make sure that you have the correct date and venue, and that you know your assigned seat number. Remember to take your student card (or your ID or driver's license) with you. It is important to get to the exam venue at least 30 minutes before your exam starts. For exams that are scheduled in the morning, it is probably best to aim to be on campus at least an hour before your exam. This will give you peace of mind, knowing that you will not be negatively impacted by traffic delays or full shuttles. UCT exam rules state that you may not have a watch or cell phone on you, but there should be a clock visible in the venue. Ask for a clock if there isn't one.

The exam venue will open 10–20 minutes before the scheduled start time. At the entrance, you will be asked to show your student card (or your ID/driver's license) and then you will need to find your designated seat. If you do not have a valid form of identification on you, you will be required to fill out a special form and report to the relevant department with your student card after the exam.

Once you are seated, you must complete the attendance slip and answer booklet cover page (as you did for all your class tests). You will then be allowed to turn over your question paper and may be granted reading time, before being instructed to start writing. UCT exam rules state that you may not leave

Pack your stationery into a clear, plastic bag or pencil case.

It's a good idea to take a water bottle and sweets or gum for the exam.



the exam during the first hour or the last 20 minutes of the exam. If you need to use the bathroom during the exam, you need to raise your hand, ask to use the bathroom and fill out a bathroom register before being escorted to the toilet.

MY STORY

Exam tips

Kenneth Freeman

Second-year mathematics student



- Get enough sleep the night before your exam.
- Do brief revision of the exam a few hours before to get your brain in the zone.
- Be grateful! Anxiety and gratitude can't co-exist in your brain.
- Take deep breaths.

You missed your exam, now what?

While it is important to plan and prepare as best as possible for your exams, there are things that can happen that are out of your control. Every year, hundreds of UCT students are unable to write their exams for various reasons. These can include getting sick just before or during your exam; having transport issues or getting into an accident; and family emergencies, such as the death of a family member. If you are unable to write your exam, don't panic. Stay calm and know that many UCT students in the past have been in the exact same situation. Even in the worst-case scenario, failing a course due to circumstances that were out of your control is not the end of the world. It is much more important that you take care of yourself and your mental health in this moment.



In the event that you miss your exam, for whatever reason, you can apply to the Deferred Exams Committee (DEC) to write a deferred exam. The DEC will evaluate your application and determine whether your explanation and evidence clearly prove that you could not have written the exam. The DEC is guided by rules that specify the kinds of things that are acceptable reasons for missing an exam. Lecturers or course conveners cannot grant students a deferred exam – the decision rests entirely with the DEC. The general guideline is that students are granted a deferred exam if it is clearly and obviously impossible for them to have been present at the exam, or if their state of health or well-being, as confirmed by a health professional, makes it impossible for them to complete the exam. To apply for a deferred exam, you will need to complete the **ACA44** form or the **ACA44a** form (for medical issues) and submit your application, along with all required supporting documentation, on PeopleSoft. An application for a deferred exam must be submitted within seven calendar days after the exam date.

If you get sick on the day of or during your exam, you can consult a Student Wellness Services nurse on Upper Campus (located in Steve Biko, Level 6).

Late applications for deferred exams will not be considered. If you need advice about the deferred exams procedure, email **deferred.exams@uct.ac.za** or phone 021 650 3595.

READY TO WRITE!

You now have a better idea of what you can expect from the upcoming exam season, as well as some useful advice on how to navigate this period successfully. As you embark on this journey, remember that you are smart and capable. All that's left is to put what you have learnt into practice. We wish you the very best and we hope that you will find satisfaction in bringing together all that you have learnt in each subject.



READ MORE

In this chapter, we've brought together principles from other chapters to help you ace your exams. Perhaps you'd like to revisit some of those other chapters. If so, here's an outline of what you can find where. You can click on the chapter titles to download the chapters.



Next-level time management for succeeding at UCT

Time management principles

Take responsibility + Practice self-care + Keep your goals in sight + Prioritise + Plan + Work smart

Time management strategies

- How to prioritise: The Urgent-Important Matrix
- Planning and scheduling tools (semester planner + weekly schedule + daily schedule)
- Working smart
- Beating procrastination



How to succeed in your first BSc tests

The difference between university and school tests

- Bloom's Taxonomy

Strategies to prepare for the tests

- Practise
- Take the initiative: Ask
- Make crib sheets
- Memorise with meaning
- Flashcards for BEES subjects

Writing the tests

- Getting ready for a test
- What to expect
- Test technique

Subject-specific tips

- Maths and applied maths
- Problem solving
- Tricks for remembering
- Biology
- Physics
- Comp Sci



Metacognition: Your key to success

- Find the gold
- Write about it
- Set goals
- Map yourself
- Use metacognition to study smart
- Fail forward!



The shape of your well-being

- Physical well-being (Healthy eating + Sleep + Exercise)
- Mental well-being (Managing stress + Managing mental health + Relaxation)
- Spiritual well-being
- Healthy relationships
- Financial well-being
- Help-seeking behaviour
- Academic well-being
- Now, what shape are you? (radar chart)



So, how does your brain work?

- Neuroplasticity and brain growth
- The forgetting curve and spaced repetition
- Long-term and working memory: Recognition versus retrieval
- Diffuse versus focussed thinking
- Neurodiversity
- The vital role of sleep in learning
- How to make the most of how your brain works



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