



Open-Book Exams

Being Flexible

Traditional exams are not always essential to measure student learning. Consider alternative ways for students to demonstrate that they have achieved course learning outcomes.

Before you decide on the format of your final assessment, consider the learning outcomes for your course. Are there outcomes that students have not yet met that you need to assess? Make sure these are outcomes that you have already taught or be prepared to add learning activities and resources to prepare students for these assessments. Remember, now is not the time to increase learner anxiety or place more demands on them. If you don't need an exam, you might consider substituting a different assessment, such as a case study, problem-solving questions, portfolios, or self-reflective activities. If you decide you need an exam, you might consider an open-book exam.

What are open-book exams?

- Exam that is designed to allow students to refer to notes, books, articles, or some other kind of approved material while writing;
- Students may be provided with the exam questions in advance;
- In some cases, students may take the exam in a formal setting; and
- In other cases, students may take the exam on their own at home. (CTL Newcastle, n.d.)

Why use an open-book exam?

- These kinds of exams require learners to use higher-order thinking rather than regurgitation (Bengtsson, 2019);
- They can help assess learner readiness to apply course content to scenarios, data sets, case studies, and real-world situations;
- They allow for exam questions that mimic professional work where information is available and the skill is in determining the appropriate application (Shwartz);
- They may reduce academic integrity concerns; and
- They can relieve anxiety in students.

However, make sure to remind students to cite what they borrow, just as they would for an essay or other kind of project.

When is an open-book exam NOT useful?

- An open-book exam is not a good option for simple retrieval-practice kinds of assessments;
- It's not a good choice for anything that requires memorization rather than application or synthesis of information; and
- It's not a good choice if application or synthesis questions don't align with your course's learning outcomes.

Examples of Kinds of Open-Book Exam Questions

The University of Newcastle Australia's Centre for Teaching and Learning has created "A Guide for Academics – Open Book Exams," which makes these suggestions:

- Use exam questions that present problem-based scenarios or real-world cases, requiring students to apply their skills and knowledge derived from the course;
- Present relevant qualitative or quantitative data and then ask students interpretative and application questions;
- Structure content or topic questions in a way that tests for an ability to apply, analyze, evaluate, create, synthesize, and interpret; and
- Use questions that probe student understanding, skills, and knowledge.

Still concerned about academic integrity?

To reduce the risk of academic dishonesty, Farrell and Maheu (2019) offer these suggestions:

- Draw specifically on course content/lectures;
- Keep the time tight (but not too tight!);
- Make the questions tough;
- Recognize collaboration; and
- Remind students you know they have access to their resources.

Additional considerations:

- How much are you wanting students to write?
- How much time are you hoping students will spend on the exam?
- Could they record their answers in video or audio instead?
- Will answers have to be in paragraphs, an essay format, point form?
- How will you assess the exam? Will you create a rubric or other tool to share with students so criteria are clear and transparent?
- How will you ensure questions are clear in case you are not available when students are writing?
- We in CELT would love to help you decide if an open-book exam is right for your course, and, if so, we can help you craft your questions. If an open-book exam isn't right for your course, we can help you explore other options—contact us at CELT@tru.ca.

Resources

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