

Prozac for Visibly Distressed Examinees

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So this is it – just a few days left to the final¹! Look at the number of things we’ve done over this year; in one year, we have learnt the sum total of all the pure micro and macro I learnt over three years in my undergraduate degree. That’s quite an achievement, so make sure you take the time to pat yourself on the back.

When I started training as a teacher in 2004, there were horror stories of how Econ B is a student’s (and a teacher’s) worst nightmare. Many of you would remember me telling you some of these stories, the famous fairy tale of how it is UK’s most failed course etc. Having taught this course now for a year, I can swear to you – its all hogwash.

This exam is there for you to sail through. It’s literally sitting there *begging* to be aced. If you’re scared of failing this exam, then you need to sit down right now and do some rethinking. In Econ B, failing takes quite an effort. It literally requires you to submit a vastly blank paper with neon signs flashing “please fail me”. I’m not kidding – that’s pretty much what it takes to fail. What surprises me is that in previous years there have been hundreds of students who have actually done that. You see, while the course is an inherent pain in the ass to the average 1st year undergraduate’s party agenda, the exam isn’t really that painful. It is a predictable set of questions that keeps recurring in different avatars. At the end of the day – its undergrad Micro/Macro... how many new questions can they really come up with?

With three days left, whats left to be done? In an ideal world, you would have finished at least one revision, and would spend the remaining time that you *have* cracking previous exam questions. But wait... if youve

*This is a lighter, perhaps more therapeutic addition to Danny Quah’s existing advice on how to take exams (<http://econwiki.lse.ac.uk/ec102-static/taking-exams.pdf>) Corrections, comments, and marriage proposals to vinayak@econ.lse.ac.uk
The latest version of this document is available at:
<http://www.vinayak.com/docs/examadvice.pdf>

¹This year’s exam is scheduled to be held on May 18, 2006

finished one revision, you have finished cracking previous exam questions. Remember that in Micro, every problem set question comes from a previous exam. If you've finished working through those problems, then you're pretty much ready to go the distance on the exam day. With Macro, remember that every question that you will be asked is a combination of the various exercises. Danny Quah and Alan Marin do not use magician hats to pull out questions that are absolutely arbitrary². They will always boil down to something you have seen on a problem set or on a lecture slide.

That said, what general advice do I have for those manically depressed by the thought of writing an exam? Here goes:

1. Make sure you walk into an exam with your head completely clear. Do **NOT** arrive at the exam extra early to discuss potential exam questions with friends. Trust me this is one for the suicidal among you. It will only bog up your head with inane last minute bullshit that will crowd out the more substantial learning you would have done the days and weeks before.
2. **Watch a movie / listen to your favourite CD / take a walk in the freezing cold** on the night before the exam (though I'd recommend you wear something warm). Get your mind off things. Talk to your mom. . . ask her how the lawn is doing, or what happened to your uncle's Gokart. Get a group of fellow sufferers and indulge in some laugh therapy³ in your kitchen. Whatever it takes to clear your head up in preparation for point number 1.
3. **Revise** everything once the day before. Go over stuff in your head. Make sure you know what the professor dudes are talking about in their lecture notes. Check that you've worked out all the problems in your problem sets. If you have, then just pick out stuff that you know you find tough and work through them.
4. **Make mental images**. This is valuable advice from an Indian. We have a tradition of memorizing everything we'll ever need to know in life. Sometimes, it doesn't hurt to mug things up. This is especially useful for IS/LM diagrams and indifference curves. In an exam, you don't want to waste time having to spontaneously think of what type of diagram to draw and what kind of curves to shift. If you've already got mental Xerox copies in your head, you just go to the exam and

²Okay, they *do* once in a while, but that's forgivable, right?

³where you just randomly laugh like a hysterical hyena for 15 minutes

you vomit them on a sheet of paper. It saves you *shitloads* of time and that's time that will prove to be extremely useful in your long answers.

5. **Take a second to think** in the exam, when you start to answer your questions, always spend an extra second planning out the route to your answer. Plan where you will fit your diagram, what it will look like, where you will write, and (most importantly) what you will write. It always adds value to your paper if you can present it wisely. Wise wisdom begets excellent marks never forget that!
6. **Torture yourself tantrically.** This one is an extremely useful stress buster. If you are not excessively bothered about time, when the examiner starts the clock, force yourself NOT to turn the question paper around for 1 minute. Just think weird thoughts (a classic is what would a Sheep be saying when that farmer dude is razing his hair off) and torture yourself not to see the paper for the first minute. It will help calm you down. Trust me.
7. **Scan the damn thing.** When you get done with your tantric torture, go over your entire paper once. Figure out which questions are butt easy, and which ones are Chinese torture.
8. **Feel free to choose your answer pattern.** It doesn't matter which order you answer your questions. If you want to do easy stuff first, sure be my guest. If you want to save them for later, that's okay too. Do whatever you're comfy with. Go the way you want. It's your choice. Just make sure you **number your questions** and **start each new answer on a fresh page**.
9. **Play it safe.** Danny Quah in his exam advice essay points this out.

“Be ruthlessly precise in how you use words and definitions.”

Don't throw words around unless you mean them. If you're not sure, don't use strong language, but be suggestive... seductive even.

10. **Be wary of ruled paper.** My friend Kevin always has problems with his exams he always practices at home with blank paper, and then freaks out when he sees ruled paper in the exam. Many of you (and I've warned you) use graph/blank paper at home. If you find that ruled paper is an annoyance, be careful of that and account for this fact when you plan your exam strategy.

11. **Be careful about presentation.** An important part of your examination is how you submit it. The University of London exam booklets have a fairly large warning that point out in bold that

“You are warned that the Examiners attach great importance to legibility, accuracy, and clearness of expression.”

. Like Danny Quah says, “it isn’t rocket science figuring out why that notice is there.” Take it seriously!

- **DON’T** be sloppy.
- **DO** try to be clean and neat.
- **DON’T** use red or green inks, stick to blue or black!
- **DON’T** repeatedly scratch work you don’t want to include in your submission. Put a neat line through it and move on. A messy paper looks butt ugly.
- **DO** start each new question (or sub-section) on a new page. Don’t worry, the paper is recycled, and we’re all environmentally conscious too, but this is your final exam. Use less toilet paper for the next two weeks as compensation.

12. **Now get lost.** Just chill out - everything will be fine. Trust me... I’m a teacher... I KNOW.

Good Luck – I’m sure you’ll kick ass!