

Considerations When Assigning Blue Book In-Person Exams

I. Today's students likely had little training in cursive or penmanship

- a. Consider implementing weekly, no-stakes, in-class practice for improving penmanship. Peer editing of such work can save faculty time and provide valuable feedback.
- b. Students who are unused to writing by hand at length may not know how large to make their letters, or when to skip lines (and when not to). Encourage students who need practice to download [handwriting worksheets](#) to print out.
- c. Since some students might not be accustomed to long hand-writing sessions, they may face cramps in a longer test. Consider requesting shorter answers.

II. Students lack experience with this type of on-the-spot testing

- a. The most important preparation for high-stakes midterms and finals is practice testing with the same format. Consider assigning in-person writing quizzes all semester long.
- b. Consider augmenting for-credit writing quizzes with ungraded, formative examples that provide further practice, and can be safely debriefed and peer edited.
- c. Offer discrete mini-lectures or practice sessions for strategies to provide the best blue-book answers:
 - i. Explain the rationale behind in-person writing: it is effective practice for work they will perform in their career, where they can expect to be constantly put "on the spot."
 - ii. Suggest they read the whole question and stop to think so that they respond (as opposed to react) to it.
 - iii. Give students time in class to practice writing a minimalist outline after a think-break. If there is time, share an example or a checklist with your class and have students annotate their work so that they become familiar with the features of a useful minimalist outline.
 - iv. Give examples of how good answers provide a balance between analysis and examples/data. Emphasize that providing irrelevant, disconnected, or unorganized answers (AKA "Data dumping") is usually to be avoided.
 - v. Provide strategies for the new-to-them time crunch. Suggest that students read the entire test before answering anything. Once this is done, students can start by answering the easiest question or the question they are most prepared to answer first.
 - vi. Explain how this type of test requires a unique manner of studying:
 1. True long-term memory results from retrieval practice (such as flashcards or a digital equivalent) spaced out over several days. There are no shortcuts for long-term memory.
 2. They should be ready with facts and dates. Retrieving these in full-sentence writing is more difficult than multiple-choice, where the selections may trigger memory.
- d. Normalize nervousness and practice relaxation techniques, such as breathing exercises. Such a strategy is likely to benefit all students.

III. The test format itself may make it easier (or harder) on students

- a. Consider providing the actual exam questions in advance, so that students can better prepare at home. If the preparation happens to include seeking ideas – whether from

humans, the Internet, or AI - this may result in students internalizing the arguments to such an extent that any assistance before class becomes moot.

- i. *Variation #1* – instead of the complete list of exam questions, one idea is to provide “too many” possible questions, only some of which will be on the exam.
 - ii. *Variation #2* – instead of verbatim exam questions, consider providing only the topics or concepts to be tested.
- b. Providing a selection of questions to answer on the exam (i.e., “answer any two out of three”) may ease discomfort for some students.
- c. Consider allowing the in-class exam to be “open notes”
 - i. *Variation #1* – allow physical notes (printed or handwritten). The use of digital devices may introduce unwanted assistance.
 - ii. *Variation #2* – allow a limited quantity of physical notes, such as one page only, or even one 3x5 card.
 - iii. *Variation #3* – allow for open notes only in the last few minutes of the exam, so that students can double-check facts and dates (note: this strategy, if employed, calls for students to write the exam in pencil rather than pen).

IV. Some students may try to pre-write notes in blue books

- a. Consider collecting and randomly redistributing empty blue books at the start of the exam hour, possibly including flipping through them briefly to ensure no notes are inside
- b. Require students to duplicate an honor pledge displayed on screen at the front of the blue book.

V. Design your exam with fairness in mind

- a. Plan the length of the exam such that the imagined slowest student can still finish in the allotted time. While this will inevitably result in many students finishing early, such a method provides the most fairness.
- b. When possible, avoid making students read lengthy passages as part of the exam. Reading is a separate skill from writing, and not all students read at the same pace.
- c. Students who have been approved for testing accommodations can take their exams at the Student Accessibility Services (SAS) offices, and it is the student’s responsibility to submit an accommodation request. However, SAS will not approve accommodations for students who merely dislike the blue book format or who struggle with handwriting. Do not refer students to SAS for these reasons.
 - i. For students registered with SAS, SAS will evaluate if a student’s disability is such that the Blue Book format creates a disadvantage in terms of demonstrating course content knowledge. Extra time for exams or the use of a Word processor are common Blue Book exam accommodations for certain disabilities.