

# How to Create Open Book Exams

July 8, 2025

## WHAT IS AN OPEN BOOK EXAM?

An open book exam is an assessment that allows students to consult approved resources—such as class notes, textbooks, or reference materials—while answering questions. In some cases, open book exams may involve providing students with the exam questions in advance.

## WHY USE OPEN BOOK EXAMS?

Open book exams shift the focus from memorization to the application, analysis, and evaluation of knowledge. They encourage higher-order thinking by requiring students to interpret, synthesize, and apply information rather than simply recall facts. This aligns well with real-world problem-solving and workplace scenarios, where individuals have access to resources but must make informed decisions.

## COMMON PITFALLS

While open book exams have many advantages, there are also challenges to be aware of:

- Poor question design: If questions are not thoughtfully constructed, students may be able to locate and copy information without demonstrating understanding or critical thinking.
- False sense of security: Students may underestimate the level of preparation required, assuming that having access to resources will make the exam easy.
- Time management issues: Students may spend too much time searching for answers instead of applying their knowledge effectively.

## TIPS FOR DESIGNING OPEN BOOK EXAMS

To make the most of this format, design your exam to assess students' comprehension, interpretation, and critical thinking. Here are some practical tips:

- Use case studies and scenarios that ask students to apply knowledge in context.
- Craft clear, concise, and unambiguous questions so students can focus their time on analysis rather than interpreting the question.
- Ask students to use, not just locate, information from their notes or textbooks—avoid questions that reward simple copying.
- Align questions with course learning outcomes, emphasizing the knowledge and skills you want students to demonstrate.

## HOW TO PHRASE OPEN BOOK EXAM QUESTIONS

Use question prompts that engage students in higher-order thinking. The table below includes examples aligned with Bloom's Taxonomy:



Type of Question	Students Are Asked To...	Example Starters
<b>Knowing and Remembering</b>	Recall factual information	What...? Where...? Who...? Define... List... Describe...
<b>Understanding</b>	Demonstrate comprehension by interpreting information	In your own words... Explain how... What did X mean when...? Give an example of...
<b>Applying</b>	Apply knowledge to new situations	How would you use...? What examples can you find to...? What would happen if...?
<b>Analyzing</b>	Break down ideas or concepts; compare and contrast	What are the parts/features of...? Why is X different from Y? What is the relationship between A and B?
<b>Evaluating</b>	Make judgments or justify decisions	What is most important/effective? Which argument is strongest? Which method is best? How would you design a...? What changes would you make? What alternatives are there to...? Can you formulate a theory for...?
<b>Creating</b>	Generate new ideas or propose solutions	

## CONCLUSION

Open book exams can be a powerful tool for assessing students' ability to apply, analyze, and evaluate information rather than simply recall it. When designed thoughtfully, they promote deeper learning and better reflect real-world problem-solving. By crafting clear, purposeful questions and setting appropriate expectations, educators can make the most of this flexible and student-centered assessment approach.

## REFERENCES

University of Newcastle. (n.d.). *A guide for academics – Open book exams*.  
[https://www.newcastle.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/268980/Open-BookExams.pdf](https://www.newcastle.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/268980/Open-BookExams.pdf)



*Assiniboine College is privileged to provide learning opportunities on the lands of the Dakota Oyate, Nakoda Oyate, Ininiwak, Nehethowak, Nehiyawak, Anishinewuk, Denesuline, Anishinaabeg, and the National Homeland of the Red River Métis.*