Info on Tests

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We know that you take tests seriously, and so do we. Here is some detailed information about what to expect on tests in this course.

The purpose of tests

We don't just test because we need a way to evaluate your work. Tests are a crucial pedagogical tool: they help you learn and retain. I rely heavily on cumulative exams because it promotes longer-term retention of the material: if you cram for an exam and then are not required so use that information again, it becomes easy to forget it. Cumulative tests also allow me to ask more synthetic questions that span different parts of the course.

Making and grading tests

I make up all tests collaboratively with the TA's. We all suggest questions and then select those that we think are the clearest, fairest, and most representative of core material. Sometimes the TA's write out ideal answers and sometimes I do; sometimes we just decide on bullet points of key material we hope to see in answers.

Tests are graded by the TA's in consultation with me.

Coverage

All material in lectures and all assignments appear on tests. There may be some courses where you are tested only on lectures or only on readings, but not this one.

The course website should be clear and explicit about what is covered on each test -- all material so far, just material since the last test, etc.

Optional questions

My tests often offer alternatives -- for example, "Answer 2 of the following 4 questions." I think this is vital because even if you are doing great in the course, it's possible to be unsure of the best way to answer a question. When you select your options, don't just consider which ones you know the most about -- also consider how confident you are that you know what response is appropriate (not exactly the same thing!).

I virtually never use mandatory questions unless except on topics that are very clearly central to the course and that have been discussed extensively in readings and/or lectures.

It will always be clear how many options you are supposed to answer. If you answer too many options, we will not pick your best answers. If you are supposed to answer 2 options but you answer 3, we grade your first 2 not your best 2.

Word limits
My questions usually have word limits. Unlimited answers make it harder to manage your time on the exam. They also encourage "kitchen sink" responses. Sometimes there will be ranges ("answer in 40-60 words"); this is to give you a general sense of how much material we think is appropriate.

We don't count the exact number of words and we don't count off for overly long answers -- we just stop reading.

If you think the answer to the question is significantly shorter than the lower word limit, you should probably think again about what we are asking.

Types of questions

The course website will provide all the information we have to give about question types. Exams virtually always have a variety of question types -- essays of varying lengths, short answer, T/F, etc. But all the info we have to give on the exams will be on the website. I don't usually answer questions in class about the test if it is covered on the website, because it makes so much more sense to just provide full information on the website -- that way everyone has access to the same information and there is no ambiguity or misunderstanding.

Grammar and Style

This isn't a course on composition or a writing-intensive course. Writing style doesn't play a major role in test grading, but it does play a role. Particularly in longer essays, we are asking you to do things that are hard to do without proper sentences. Telegraphic writing, sentence fragments, and points thrown together without structure might sometimes get you full credit, but usually not. As word limits get shorter, sentence and paragraph structure become less important.

Cop a Plea answers

This only pertains to a small fraction of students, but here it is anyway. Sometimes, for whatever reason, you are completely unable to answer a question; maybe you simply didn't read an assignment that is the subject of a mandatory question. In this situation, you may be tempted to just start writing, figuring you have nothing to lose and maybe you'll get a little credit. These answers take a disproportionate amount of our time because we often have to read the answer several times before finally concluding that you really don't have a clue. So we sometimes offer a "Cop a Plea" deal whereby you admit you don't have a clue, you save everyone some time, and you get 1 point. This is not in effect unless explicitly stated in the question.

Questions about the grading on your exam

The many TA's I have worked with at Wash U have been highly conscientious in grading exams. To ensure fairness and consistency, we normally have each essay question be graded by one TA, so that similar answers will always get the same score. (With short answers and objective questions, this isn't necessary.)

You are very welcome to speak with me or the TA's if you have questions about the grading of your exam. But I am best at discussing the content in general. For questions about specific scores, you have to see the TA who graded the question in question. They will have compared your answer to others' answers, so they will be the ones to explain why you got the score you did.