



Tackling Exam Questions with Confidence

A practical student guide to staying calm and thinking clearly in maths exams

This guide is for you - written by someone who has sat with hundreds of students in the lead-up to their exams and knows exactly what goes through your mind.

The aim of this guide is not to guarantee that every question suddenly becomes easy. Instead, it is designed to help you stay in control of your thinking so that you give yourself the best chance of showing what you know.

You do not need to rush at the start. Some students like to scan the whole paper, but this can sometimes create unnecessary worry. A better approach is to note how many questions there are and roughly how long to spend on each. Earlier questions are usually quicker; later ones often require more steps.

A process for tackling each question

Not every step will apply to every question, but these stages give you a reliable way to begin.

1. Read the question carefully. Underline or note the important information: numbers, key facts, formulae, and what the question is actually asking you to find.
2. Check the instruction. Words such as *calculate*, *show*, *explain* or *estimate* tell you what the examiner expects to see.
3. If you genuinely have no idea how to start, move on. You can always return later with a clearer head.
4. Draw a sketch or organise the information in a way that makes sense to you. Diagrams and labels often make a question clearer.
5. Write down any relevant formulae before you begin calculating.
6. Think about your mathematical tools. Ask yourself which topic or method might help. Some questions require more than one step or idea.
7. Look at the number of marks available. More marks usually mean more working is expected.
8. Begin the calculation process. Starting is often the hardest part, and progress usually follows once you begin.
9. Keep asking yourself:

What could I do next?

Does my answer make sense in the context of the question?

10. Follow the process through step by step.

Answering maths questions is often like solving a puzzle. You do not always see the full path at the beginning, but working logically can help you find your way through. Even if you do not reach the final answer, clear working can still earn marks.

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Moving through the paper

After completing a question, take a brief moment to decide whether your answer looks reasonable before moving on.

Keep an eye on the time as you work. It is usually better to attempt every question than to spend too long on one and leave others unanswered.

If you reach the end with time remaining, take a moment to breathe and then return to any unfinished questions. A second look often helps, especially once you have settled into the exam.

A final thought

If you have prepared well and practised regularly, the exam is simply an opportunity to show what you can do. Stay calm, work methodically, and focus on one question at a time.

Once it is finished, it is finished. A couple of hours of careful thinking is all that is required.

Good luck.

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