

Examination time guide

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The time students need to complete an examination depends on the assessment method and the number of questions on an assessment. A sufficient number of questions is important to ensure the reliability of the assessment (the more questions, the higher the reliability). The number of questions is also important for the representativeness of the assessment for the material (content validity). The more important the subject is in the material, the more questions should be included in the assessment on this topic. A table of specifications may be a useful tool here.

For help estimating how much time is needed for a desired number of questions on an assessment, or how many questions can be answered in a given maximum examination time, see the tables included below for various question types¹.

Response times for open questions

Type of question	Response time	Example question
Fill-in-the-blanks question and complete-the-answer question	½ minute	The decision will be made next week whether one of the most [hate] taxes will be eliminated. What part of the inner ear is the Corti organ located in?
Short answer question	1 minute	According to the New Testament, what did Pilate do with his hands after he sentenced Christ to death?
Long answer question	10 minutes	What were the long-term effects of the Crusades (name three)? Explain your answer.
Essay question / Argument question	25 minutes	Explain the developments over a period of ten years of unemployment, if all salaries were halved in one fell swoop. Assume that no further changes will occur in the economic cycle.

Response times for closed questions

Type of question	Response time	Number of questions generally needed for a reliable assessment
Correct/Incorrect question or two alternatives	50 seconds	80-100
Three alternatives	60 seconds	60-80
Four alternatives	75 seconds	40-60

Factors that influence the required examination time

In addition to the question type, there are other factors that may influence the required examination time:

- Is it an open or closed book exam? Questions for which information must be looked up often take more time.

¹ These indications are taken from existing literature. They are probably based on assessments completed on paper.

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Suggestions for adjustments can be emailed to tentamenservice@vu.nl.

- Does the answer require calculations? Math questions generally take more time.
- The amount of material that students had to study in order to arrive at an answer.
- The amount of text included in the question. A long introductory text (for example a case) takes more time to read.
- Finally, past experiences also provide a good estimate of the time. How many questions were asked during this exam in previous years and how long did the students take?

With regard to the final point: the nature of the material, the discipline, and the questions are an important factor in the required examination time. It is therefore advisable to measure in practice how long it takes students to complete a specific exam. Count how many students are still present in the exam room every fifteen minutes or every half hour, and conduct spot checks to see how much of their exam they have completed. It is possible that a number of students stay seated for quite some time even though they have already answered every question. For example, if 90% of the students taking a 3-hour exam are done after 2 hours, it can be assumed that the exam time can also be set at 2.5 hours.

In the event that it is difficult to fully assess the examination material within the available time, it may also be possible to work with partial assessments or additional assessment methods. This means students will also receive feedback on their performance earlier, allowing them to change their study behaviour.

Findings based on data obtained from VU examinations²

In 2014, the response time of a number of exams with open questions and a number of exams with multiple choice questions was tracked to get an impression of the average response time per question.

Selection of multiple choice exams: 9 multiple choice exams (40-60 questions with four possible answers):

- Average response time per question was 79 seconds and varied between 1 and 2 minutes per question.
- The average response time of the slowest student was 148 seconds and varied between 1.5 and 3 minutes per question.

Selection of assessments with open questions: 6 exams with open questions (15-40 questions with limited answer space per exam)

- Average response time per question was 5.5 minutes and varied between 3.5 and 6.5 minutes per question.
- The average response time of the slowest student was 7.5 minutes and varied between 4.5 and 9 minutes per question.

Research shows that the standard of the answers given by the students does not differ greatly between electronic assessments and assessments on paper, but that the presentation and the structure of the answers for electronic assessments is preferred as students have more means at

² This concerned electronic examinations.

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their disposal for editing the text. This does not lead to any significant differences in the time required between electronic assessments and assessments on paper.