Successful and Ethical Online Exam Writing – Script

**Slide 1 (Introduction)**- Hello everyone. My name is Ruth Silverman and I’m a Learning Services Coordinator from the Student Learning Commons. I’m pleased to be presenting this workshop as part of Academic Integrity Week. This workshop is partly based on a survey I gave to students in late June 2020 in which I asked them what they know about the formats of exams they have later this term and what they think will be most challenging about those exams. I am grateful to those students who took the time to respond. At the present time as instructors adapt to the remote format, there seems to be a shift away from courses being assessed on the basis of 1-3 high stakes exams and towards several smaller assessments such as quizzes. Please note that although throughout this session I use the word “exams,” the advice applies equally to tests and quizzes, however small.

**Slide 2 (Land acknowledgement)** – I would like to acknowledge that all 3 campuses of SFU are on the ancestral and unceded lands of the Coast Salish people, different Nations historically at the 3 different campuses. Let’s all take a moment to think about our connection to those ancestral, unceded lands and consider learning more about the Indigenous history of the places where we live, work and play, for example by looking at the website native-land.ca.

**Slide 3 (Workshop outline)** – This is what I’ll be talking about. First I will address cheating and cheating prevention. Then I will move on to some of the basic ways to prepare for any exam. Then I will move on to more specific information based on the common challenges and formats identified in my survey: exam anxiety, how to manage time when writing an exam including strategies for forced order and time limited questions, strategies for multiple choice questions, strategies for open book exams, and how to prevent and manage any technical difficulties that may arise.

**Slide 4 (Types of cheating on exams)** – This is a bit of a simplification of the types of cheating identified in SFU’s Student Academic Integrity Policy. There are a number of ways that students try to cheat. Perhaps the most obvious is copying from another student’s test or allowing another student to copy from yours. Some students cheat by consulting material that they are not allowed to consult, such as navigating to Canvas pages while writing a closed book exam. Some students share information with each other, for example by using blue tooth headsets to communicate, or share resources without permission in an open book test. Clearly, getting someone else to write your test for you is cheating; in the online environment students have cheated by using software such as Team Viewer to get someone else to take over their computer and write their test for them. And finally, obtaining and distributing copies of exam questions and answers is clearly against the rules. Please consult the Student Academic Integrity Policy for more specific information on what conduct is prohibited during exams.

**Slide 5 (Preventing & Detecting)** – Universities and professors are aware that the shift to remote learning and taking exams from home has posed a greater risk of widespread cheating and have taken measures to prevent it from occurring and detect it when it happens. Many professors are changing the ways in which they assess students, such as assigning a paper or project instead of an exam, or switching to an oral exam, an open book exam that takes into account students being able to use course materials, or else to an exam with very strict and limited timing. It certainly helps when instructors are clear and consistent in communicating their expectations for behaviour during exams, including exactly what resources are allowed and not allowed. Instructors are also using technology to limit students’ ability to get away with cheating. Some require that students keep their webcams and audio on throughout the exam, and may even require that the student use the webcam to show someone supervising their exam their entire environment before they start to answer questions. SFU’s instructional platform Canvas also tracks times that students were using their Canvas courses, so an instructor can easily detect prohibited
use during exams. And finally, numerous types of electronic proctoring and document security software can be used to detect cheating from factors such as key strokes and eye movements. I am already hearing stories from instructors about catching cheaters during remote exams in the last couple of terms. And once they get caught, SFU’s Academic Integrity website says the most common penalties are getting a grade of zero on the exam and/or a final grade of FD – failure for academic dishonesty – on their transcript. So why risk it?

**Slide 6 (Why students cheat)** — Students often perceive that they are in competition with their fellow students for limited resources, such as a seat in a popular graduate or professional program. They are under a lot of stress and pressure for grades and when you combine that with a lack of confidence in their ability to earn their desired grade through their own efforts, cheating sometimes happens out of desperation. Sometimes they feel that cheating is widespread among other students, so they might as well do it too, or maybe that is just an excuse they use to rationalize their behaviour. The common feeling that they won’t get caught is likely even more common now that students are writing in their own homes without in-person proctoring. And also at home, students are more likely to be tempted by easy access to unauthorized resources such as textbooks or cell phone web browsers, or helpers such as a roommate who has taken the course. Sadly, some students end up getting caught for cheating because they aren’t clear on what is allowed for their exam and run afoul of the rules due to misunderstanding. Back to the question of what professors or institutions can do to prevent cheating. In my opinion, the best way to prevent cheating stems from an empathic consideration of, and response to, the reasons that students cheat.

**Slide 7 (The best institutional measure)** — In a recent opinion piece in Inside Higher Ed, Douglas Harrison, a member of the Board of Directors of the International Center for Academic Integrity wrote [what is written on the slide], That is why the Student Learning Commons and the Academic Integrity Coordinator have partnered to offer you Academic Integrity week: To support you in getting the tools you need to feel supported and confident about your ability to succeed academically while maintaining ethical behaviour. As a learning specialist, the best way I know to offer support so you will feel confident in your own ability to succeed on exams is to let you know about the most effective exam preparation and writing strategies for the current context, and to alert you to challenges to your academic integrity that may arise and how to deal with them so that you don’t inadvertently cheat. That’s what the rest of this workshop is about.

**Slide 8 (Inform yourself)** — It is always crucial but especially in this unusual situation to know what to expect from your exams. If you don’t know something that would help you prepare, make sure to ask your professor or TA. For example, what software will you use to access the exam? if you are going to have a limited amount of time to answer each question, how much time you will be given? And most importantly from an academic integrity standpoint, you need to be crystal clear on what, if any, materials you are allowed to use. For example, if it is an open book exam, are you allowed to use any resource including the vast internet? Or just your textbook an notes?

**Slide 9 (Set up)** - To the extent that you can, find a quiet, reasonably comfortable place to write your exam. Enlist the help of those you live with to make sure that they do not disturb you during the exam and also will take care of other interruptions such as a ringing doorbell. If your wifi has been glitchy this term, try to ensure that nobody else is streaming while you are writing your exam. Know the technical requirements of the exam and do your best to meet them. For example, many instructors are requiring a camera and your microphone to be on to prevent cheating. You would not only need to have those items, but I would also recommend earplugs to avoid getting distracted by other students’ background
noise. If you have difficulty meeting technical requirements, talk to the professor far in advance. Keep any materials you are allowed to use what if any materials you are allowed to use during the exam close by, including the contact information of your instructor and TA in case there is a technical issue during the exam. Don’t have anything near you that might distract you or tempt you to cheat. Keep your phone and any materials you are not allowed to use far out of the room, possibly in the hands of another member of your household. If you normally use your phone to tell time, use an alternative such as the clock on your computer or an old-school watch. Use website blockers to help you avoid the temptation to open any websites you are not permitted to look at during the exam.

**Slide 10 (Before the Exam)** - The next few pieces of advice are based on a highly influential study that is cited on this slide. In 2013, the researchers reviewed 20 years of research on study strategies and summarized their findings about effectiveness. Two strategies stood out as working well at any grade level, in any area of study math, English, biology .... One is distributed practice – spacing your studying out into frequent, short study blocks over the course of weeks before exams. Doing that – as opposed to cramming - will help ensure that you can cover all the material in a relatively calm, not sleep deprived way. You will have a chance to identify any material you’re not sure about early enough to seek help from your TA. You will have a chance to look at material more than once – to forget it and then reconstruct it again from memory – a key skill you will need to do on your exam, even if it’s open book. Distributed practice is the way to go. And you can avoid sabotaging yourself in the name of preparation by pulling an all-nighter before the exam. Instead, get a good night’s sleep to enhance your energy level, problem solving ability, concentration, and memory. Because two heads are better than one, it always helps to study with other students, even in this virtual environment. Connect over FaceTime or Zoom to help with motivation and accountability to study and, if you study with classmates, you can also quiz each, take turns explaining concepts to each other, of share opinions about which material is likely to be emphasized on the exam or how much detail will be required. You can harness the power of the group without meeting synchronously by simply taking part in a group chat.

**Slide 11 (Exam Prep inventory)** - If you are planning to study over time and use distributed practice, it would help to first get a realistic estimate of how long it might take you to practice everything that will be covered on the exam, so that you know how much time you need to make for studying in your schedule and how far in advance you need to start. That is why it is useful to make an exam preparation inventory, as shown in the example here. The two minute video on this slide will walk you through the process of doing so.

**Slide 12 (Before the Exam)** – Distributed practice is the first strategy that the study identified as useful in any situation, and the second one is practice testing. Trying to find, create, and answer questions in the same format as you will get on the test works for any discipline, from essay tests in history to multiple choice in biology. But remember, they need to be at a comparable level to the questions you will get on the test. They can’t all be about defining a term or regurgitating the same example of a concept that was given in class. You need to practice questions calling for you to apply concepts – sometimes multiple concepts at once – to new examples. You also need to practice questions that ask about relationships between concepts from different parts of the course. The best source of practice questions is your instructor – if they are so kind. If not, you and a group of your classmates will ideally make up your own questions based on concepts that strike you as related or similar, as well as creating your own examples. Try to answer questions made up by others from memory, as this is the skill you will need for the test, even if it is an open book exam. Practice under timed conditions, especially if each question will be
timed on the test. For more detailed information about study strategies, you can watch a separate screencast called Study Strategies that Work from the Student Learning Commons' Recorded Webinars page.

**Slide 13 (Exam Anxiety)** - In their responses to my survey in June 2020, a number of students expressed concern about exam anxiety. This is not surprising given this unusual, anxiety provoking situation of having to write tests at home during a pandemic, but even in the before time, it was very common for students to experience anxiety when preparing for and/or writing exams. There are many ways to deal with this situation, some of which, like studying, are most useful if you start practicing now, before you’re in an anxious situation. There are a few basics. For the most part, preparation is the key to reducing anxiety. You may feel too anxious to prepare, but if you are able to push through that, you often feel much better after the first little while. Pay attention to the basics of health — sleep, exercise and proper nutrition — even during busy times. Actually ESPECIALLY during busy times. These activities energize you and reduce your stress, so why would you give them up when you most need them? Also, pay attention to what you are telling yourself when you feel anxious. You might realize that you keep sending yourself negative messages while you’re trying to study, such as “I’m going to fail the test.” Practice writing down those thoughts when you think them, and then writing down a more positive response such as “I always feel unprepared when I first start to study, but I’ve noticed that when I study anyhow, I usually get a better mark than I expect.” Meditation is a great way to reduce anxiety, and works best when practiced regularly. Health and Counselling offers drop-in mindfulness meditation sessions over Zoom on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays at 12:30. Another great resource for exam anxiety is to work with a counsellor at HCS – because they work exclusively with university students, the counsellors here have developed an expertise in treating exam anxiety. If you have severe exam anxiety that causes your mind to go blank on exams even when you are well prepared, particularly if this situation has happened for a number of years, you may have an anxiety disorder. It might be worth checking it out with a doctor, either at HCS or elsewhere. If you receive a formal diagnosis, contact SFU’s Centre for Accessible Learning to see if they can help arrange accommodations for your exam such as extra time. In fact, if you qualify for accommodations through the CAL due to any health condition, those accommodations should still be available in this online context. If you want more information about how to deal with exam anxiety, please watch the fun 4.5 minute video linked from this slide.

**Slide 14 (Manage your Time)** – Running out of time was, by far, the biggest concern of students who took my survey. I’m reminding you here of how to manage time in a typical exam. Skim the entire exam first, make a mental note of how much time you should be spending per mark, and then answer the questions from easiest to most difficult. If your exam has multiple choice questions, as well short answer or essay questions, it’s worth reading the essay questions before tackling the multiple choice questions, because the multiple choice questions might give you clues for answering longer questions that you can’t answer right away.

**Slide 15 (Untitled)** – At this point, those of you who have forced order exams must be pretty frustrated because you can’t apply any of those strategies. You never get the opportunity to see the exam as a whole, and you can’t answer easier questions first or go back to a question if you remember something new. It is a frustrating situation, but your instructor’s choice of exam formats is something you can’t control, so you will only waste time getting anxious about it. I asked others in my profession what they would suggest in this situation, and one suggested that you stop thinking about each question once it’s over so that your feelings about it don’t take time and mental energy away from subsequent questions. It’s the same thing we’d advise if you had 2 exams in the same day. Let’s say you wrote your English exam in the morning and you felt you did poorly. You would have to distance yourself from those
feelings for your afternoon biology exam by using positive self-talk such as “I did what I could and I can’t control my grade in English. Biology is more my strength anyhow and I need to focus on that right now.” That’s the sort of thing you will have to do mentally and emotionally many times in a forced order exam. For those of you with the added element of each question having a time limit, you need to find out what that limit is. I had been intending to suggest setting a timer and practicing answering questions within that time frame, but my colleague suggested it would be even more useful to give yourself 2/3 or ¾ of the time you will be given for each question on the exam when you practice. To be able to answer questions in that time limit, you will have to not just study for the exam, but overprepare to the point where you hardly even need to think about answers – they will almost come automatically. In addition to speeding up your test taking by knowing the content of your course very well, you will also speed up if you learn and use good strategies for answering particular question formats.

**Slide 16 (Multiple Choice)** – I am going to talk for a minute about multiple choice tests specifically, because from what students have told me, it seems that most of the forced order timed tests involve multiple choice questions. For the most part, multiple choice questions are only worth one mark each and there is no penalty for guessing. For that reason, whether or not the question will disappear after a set time, you need to discipline yourself to only spend so long puzzling over a question that you’re truly confused about or have no idea. If, for example, if there are 60 multiple choice questions to be completed in 60 minutes, that is one minute per question. Don’t rush through the test as some people do if they are anxious and just want to get out of there, but if you have thought about it for close to the one minute mark and haven’t yet figured out the answer, you need to force yourself to choose one option, move on and forget about it. Although that might result in losing the mark for that question, applying that strategy consistently will likely result in a higher overall grade for the test.

**Slide 17 (Example)** - I will show you another important strategy for taking multiple choice tests using this example question from a human biology class. It’s a good example of an application question in which you are to take your knowledge of the function of rods and cones in light adaptation and apply it to an example. You are much more likely to get questions like this than a memorization question that asked, for example, “Which of these types of receptors adapts better in the dark?” I will pause for 10 seconds while you read the question in full. Confusing eh? Often confusion stems from options being similar – either in their wording like in this question, or by using concepts with only subtle differences between them as options. Usually the options are more confusing than the question stem itself.

**Slide 18 (Same Example)** – This is why a good strategy is to read only the question stem at first and ignore the options. If you were writing a paper test, I would even tell you to cover up the options with a piece of paper. That allows you to think about the concepts in the question uninterrupted by confusing information. If you remember which of rods or cones adapts faster to changes in light and which adapts better, you can probably think of the right answer before you even see the options.

**Slide 19 (Same Example)** – If that’s the case, you can quickly scan the options and pick out the answer you are thinking of. If you think an answer is right, read it carefully in full just in case before answering. If it happens to be the first or second answer listed and you’re sure that’s the correct, best, and only response, you might not even have to read the other options, saving yourself time. But if you’re unsure, think of more than one answer when you are looking at the question stem, or if it’s the type of question that could have more than one right answer, you need to make sure that there isn’t an option at the bottom like “Both b and c” or “All of the above.” For more information, take a look at the resource from the University of Toronto given at the bottom of this slide. In addition to providing the example I have been using, that resource will show you the 10 most common types of multiple choice questions and will
give you specific strategies for answering each type. Less confusion, and reading carefully with a clear head, will save you considerable time.

**Slide 20 (Open book exams)** – Let’s move on to a very different type of exam that many survey respondents said they would have to write, open book exams, in which you are allowed to look at materials such as your notes, readings, and recorded lectures while you are writing your exam. This type of exam has become popular among instructors in our at home context because instructors realize that even with a requirement for cameras and audio to be on, it may more difficult than usual to catch students using unauthorized materials than when exams are held in person. An open book exam in which anything of relevance can be accessed takes that sort of cheating out of the equation. Usually open book exams are made up of essay and short answer questions. If you think you can get away with studying less because you can always look up anything you don’t know, you are in for a big surprise. Open book exams are typically designed with even more challenging questions focused on discussing relationships between concepts and applying them to new examples – the sorts of questions that can’t just be looked up. And typically instructors make them long so that you won’t have time to look up much that you don’t remember. For that reason, you still need to prepare by answering practice questions from memory, ideally within a limited amount of time. If you write out the answers to your practice questions, have them nearby for the actual exam. Likely, you won’t be able to copy entire answers because you need to pay attention to even minor differences in the question, but it’s possible that parts of your practice answers will be relevant. Plagiarism is still a concern. Make sure to clarify in advance with your instructor whether you need to provide citations and in what format. If you will need to provide citations, you also should practice doing so when answering your practice questions.

**Slide 21 (Open book exams)** – For many open book tests, you can use any materials you want except for the assistance of another person. However, for some you are limited to certain materials such as textbook and notes – no Googling or looking at Canvas modules. It is important to be 100% clear in advance on what you are allowed and stick with those materials. Also, although you should answer from memory as much as you can, you should also organize materials in advance for having to look a few things up quickly. It is useful to condense the information by writing summaries, or making concept maps or comparison charts. Know the index and table of contents of books well. Make good use of highlighting and colour coding different types of information, and if you are using hard copy textbooks or paper notes, use labelled post-it flags so you can turn directly to the page you need.

**Slide 22 (Take-home exams)** – A few respondents to my survey were expecting an open book exam that extends over a few days, rather than over a few hours. These are usually called “take-home” exams, but in the current context when everything is “take-home,” that name is somewhat meaningless. Many of the tips are the same as for a regular open book exam, and you should expect even more challenging application and analysis questions. The time limit isn’t such a factor, so knowing exactly where key information is in your materials isn’t as crucial. However, you still have to do a lot of preparation in advance to know the material well enough to anticipate and practice with challenging high level questions. For these extended exams, it is even more important to have a suitable, ergonomic workspace. You will need to clear your schedule for those days in advance as you wouldn’t want to have 2 of 3 days taken up with shifts at work, for example. Also plan for down time or exercise each day and a healthy sleep. When I wrote a 3-day take home exam, I worked from about 9:30 in the morning to 5:00 with a lunch break and walk each day, then took time for family and dinner, went to bed by 11:00, and was back at it the next day around 9:30.
Slide 23 (Technical Issues – Protection) – A few students who answered my survey were worried about technical issues during the exam. The best thing to do is to protect yourself against these issues before you even start. For short answer and essay tests, for example, type your answers into a separate document that you save frequently and then copy and paste them into the test, so that you have a copy if the test glitches. Never navigate away from the test page. If you are allowed to do research on other websites, do so on a separate tab, window or even a different device. Never forget to click “Submit” at the end of the test and take a screen shot of the submission confirmation just in case.

Slide 24 – If a technical problem does arise, report it to the professor immediately with a screen shot or at least a word for word account of any error message you have gotten. That’s why I have told you to have the professor and TA’s contact information handy while writing the test.

Slide 25 – We have given you a ton of additional information on your Canvas module to look at as needed, but there is even more information available about exams and other related topics under the orange “Learning and Studying” tile on the SLC homepage. While you’re on our homepage, click on the rotating image on the slide. While SFU is remote, it will always be the first rotating image that comes up, and it gives you a summary of all of our virtual services available to help you.

Slide 23 – Well, that’s it for now. I hope this has been helpful. If so, why don’t you make a commitment in writing to yourself by writing down a few ideas you have heard that you will try to help you succeed on your next exam? You can also type those ideas into the websurvey given on this slide and, if you do, you will be given credit on your co-curricular record for watching this webinar. For those of you who don’t know, the co-curricular record, or CCR, is an official record, like a transcript, of activities that you engaged with at SFU outside of class. All the best on your exams! And remember, the SLC is here for you virtually if you need any additional support with academic strategies.