Guidance on Preparing Final Exams and Assessments for Spring 2021

The Spring 2021 Final Exam Policy defaults final exams into a take-home format, with students completing their exams at any point during the exam period (May 6-14). Below you will find recommendations for preparing and administering take-home final exams. We also describe alternative types of final course assessments, which may supplement or replace a take-home final exam. As always, we invite you to consult with the McGraw Center with any questions.

Recommendations for Take-home Final Exams

Level the playing field. Consider ways to level the playing field among students completing an exam under variable circumstances, and at various times during the exam period. This might mean making a take-home final exam “open book.” You might permit students to consult course materials on the exam, but write exam questions that require students to creatively and critically engage those materials.

Design for academic integrity. We recommend that you design exam questions that require students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate course material -- in short, questions for which answers cannot be easily located in internet resources. Explicitly remind students of their academic integrity obligations as well, particularly since students will be completing the self-scheduled take-home exam at different times throughout the exam period. For instance:

- If students should not discuss the content of the exam with other students in the class, make this guidance explicit both prior to the exam period and on the exam itself.
- Specify what resources students may or may not use to complete a take-home final exam, and what forms of collaboration (if any) are permitted.
- Remind students that Rights, Rules, Responsibilities explicitly states that students may not use online solutions (such as those available on Chegg or Slader) when completing work for credit -- nor can they themselves publish, sell, or distribute course-related materials.
- Both Canvas and Blackboard offer instructors the opportunity to randomize exam questions so that students will not receive questions in the same order. Faculty may also split a three-hour exam into three one-hour parts, requiring students to upload their answer for each part before proceeding to the next one. Both strategies may help to reduce both real and perceived instances of impermissible collaboration on a take-home exam.

Set a time limit. No take-home final exam should take more than eight hours for students to complete and most will take three hours. If an exam is time-limited, then you should use the timer feature for your exam in the learning management system (Blackboard or Canvas), which allows you to check the timestamp of your students' submissions.
Plan for academic accommodations. Students who have been approved for testing accommodations must continue to receive these accommodations for a take-home final exam. Please consult the Faculty Guidance for Accommodating Students for Remote Class Administration developed by the Office of Disability Services (ODS) or reach out to ODS directly with questions. Access the new ODS accommodation management system via https://princeton-accommodate.symplicity.com/.

Types of Alternative (or Supplemental) Final Assessments

Portfolios: Portfolios are a cumulative collection of work that allow faculty to measure a student’s growth and change over the term in a holistic manner. You can allow students to revise individual assignments before compiling them into the portfolio or invite them to introduce the portfolio as a whole, reflecting on how their work has evolved over the semester. Each piece in the portfolio can also be annotated by students with comments on their creative or analytic process.

Oral exams or presentations: Oral exams or presentations allow students to demonstrate their ability to explain course concepts, describe their thinking or problem-solving process, and respond to questions. Presentations can be delivered via Zoom or other web conferencing tools, or can be recorded and uploaded to Blackboard or Canvas.

Reflection papers: You may ask students to write a reflection paper that discusses their intellectual growth in your course. While this assessment type does not test knowledge or skills, it may give you insight into the course’s impact on your students. Reflection papers can be completed in an untimed and offline environment, and submitted via your course website.

Reports and memos: Often written for an intended (if sometimes imagined) audience, reports and memos allow students to synthesize and apply course knowledge and skills to a defined problem. A memo may be cumulative, drawing on the entire semester’s materials, or more focused in its approach.

Digital exhibits: Digital exhibits, hosted either on a course blog or in the University’s Digital Library, give students opportunities to not only describe objects in detail but also to interpret those materials within the context of the entire course. Exhibits also give students experience curating objects to make an argument or tell a story.

Proposed study or experiment: You might ask students to apply what they’ve learned to a novel problem, proposing the design of a study or experiment to investigate the question in the form of an (imagined) grant proposal. You might also assign a “scenario design” assignment in which students identify and apply knowledge to an existing problem.
**Course reader or critical edition**: Invite students to curate a collection of readings on a particular theme, and then present them with an introductory essay that describes the theme and briefly introduces each text. Or invite them to dive deeper into a single text, preparing a detailed (even line-by-line) commentary with a thematic introduction. This could be an individual assignment, or the individual projects could come together online as a resource for future students in the course.

**Annotated bibliography**: Students could prepare an annotated bibliography on a research problem or question they or you design. You might ask them to go beyond simply locating sources--assess each author’s contribution to the question or problem, group similar approaches, and provide introductory or framing commentary to the bibliography. By evaluating, grouping, and comparing published work relevant to a research question students, and writing up their findings in a clear format, students might produce a resource others could use.

**Annotated timeline or map**: Using tools like those described in the McGraw digital toolkit, you could have students create and annotate a digital timeline or map highlighting key course events or places. McGraw staff are available to consult on the best tools for your course as well as to help your students learn to use them.

If you develop an alternative assessment, we especially recommend that you develop a grading rubric for the assignment. A grading rubric identifies what you will value and reward in your students’ work. We recommend that you share that grading rubric with your students (we’re happy to consult on developing one).