

Exam Strategies

One of the most ineffective exam strategies, if it can be called a strategy, is leaving everything to the last minute and then cramming for the exam in a string of all nighters fueled by caffeine, nicotine and sugar (or some other substance of choice). Not only will your body, and hence your mind, be functioning at subpar levels, but you will probably be creating other conditions for failure, such as test anxiety since you are unsure about your level of preparation. In reality there are no secrets to how to excel when taking an exam, but, unfortunately, many students fail to realize, or accept, that it's not just luck, but proper study habits over the course of the entire semester, not just the day or week before the test. We will break down the three parts of the exam period and see just what makes for success.

Before the Exam

Building a Foundation for Success

Thorough preparation for the exam is the best way to ensure a good grade. This entails many of the habits and techniques we have already discussed. If you follow the SQ3R approach to reading your assignments before your lecture and use the Cornell Note Taking method when you read and during class, you have already laid a sound foundation for success. It is also a good idea to integrate your reading and lecture notes immediately after your lecture and review them. Keep in mind that a typical course lasts from three to four months, so reviewing your notes weekly is hugely important to long-term retention. Your review should not be a passive revision, but active in nature (see active review below).

SOS!

You should also identify when you need help on understanding something that you just can't seem to master. Most professors are more than happy to help you with questions after class or during their office hours. Take advantage of the time they put at your disposal - that is part of what they get paid for! In addition, many universities have tutoring systems in place, where graduate students or well prepared undergraduate students that have already taken the exams you are facing are available for help. They can be a great resource since they have probably taken the same exams you have to, with the same professors.

Identifying Test Evaluation Keys

Many students don't see the forest for the trees, as they saying goes. All too often, they spend an inordinate amount of time studying material that is most

likely not going to be on the exam because they failed to identify what the professor is going to ask on the exam. The first step is to identify the scope of the exam, including what knowledge and skills you need to meet the course objectives. This is usually provided in the course syllabus. If you've done the assigned reading, attended lectures and spent time on note taking, this should not be much of a problem.

Now it's time to find out what was on past exams! Many professors will provide past exams as a study tool. If they do, make sure you use them in your preparation. If they don't, talk to students that have taken the exam in the past and find out what the professor wants you to know (is all the material covered in the course on the exam or just a part of it). Many professors will also tell you what to concentrate on for the exam during lectures, so if you didn't attend, make sure to talk to other students that did. Many courses have one or more review classes at the end of the term where the professor will go over the most important concepts - make sure you're there.

The logistics of the exam are also important. You need to know what type of questions will be on it: multiple choice, fill in the blank, open questions, etc. Know how much each question is worth in the grading system, as well as if leaving it blank counts against your score or not, so that you can dedicate your time effectively. Are there materials that you can or should bring to the exam (calculators, dictionaries, etc.)? Some professors also give open-book exams where you can use your textbooks and notes. Find out how long the exam lasts. Time management during the exam is often critical.

Get Organized

Once you have zeroed in on what is going to be on the exam and how it is structured, get the readings, lecture notes and textbook pages that are the focus of the exam and organize them by topic. Read through the material and decide whether it can be condensed. If so, creating an outline could be an efficient way of making another study aid. An outline is nothing more than attempt to condense large amounts of information from all your course materials into a logical system. Many professors, or the textbooks themselves, provide outlines. However, if they don't you can create your own by focusing on the key issues and concepts that will be covered on the exam. The outline should not be more than one or two pages in length. A concept map is a great alternative to a completely textual outline.

When, Where and How Long?

When is the best time to study is a difficult question to answer, although the majority of students are most effective between the time they wake up and dinner. However, some students excel in the evening. The important thing is that your brain is ready to learn and you are free from distractions. Where is exactly the place where you've been doing your reading and reviewing during the semester: a quiet place free of disturbances and distractions that is comfortable and has proper lighting is usually the best bet. How long should you study. Many studies show that the brain becomes less effective after an thirty minutes to an hour, depending on the individual. Taking a short break is conducive to learning more efficiently. Just make sure your five minute break does not turn into an hour.

Active Study

If you have read and mastered the SQ3R reading technique, then you are already halfway home. The second R, Recite, is an active learning technique because it engages you in explaining what you have studied. If possible, explain it to a classmate and have the person ask you questions about the material so that you are actively understanding and interacting with the content. Once you feel you have mastered the material, create a quiz for each section in your study guide. Complete it and then redo any questions that you did not get correct. Naturally, using past tests and quizzes is also a great way to test your comprehension. Don't limit yourself to the materials provided for the course. Check out the Internet for resources that can help you test your preparation. You live in a time of intense technological development that has put myriad resources at your finger tips. Use the Internet for something other than social media!

Study Groups?

Studying with friends can be a fun and engaging experience, but they are not necessarily for everyone. Make sure you chose your group members judiciously and follow a few rules of thumb. Study groups should:

- Be a form of active learning, not a passive review of the material; think of them as an opportunity to explain what you have learned to your class of students who are going to ask you questions to better their understanding;
- Make sure that you rotate who is going to explain the content, not letting one member dominate the group;
- Meet a limited number of times a week; remember this is where you are actively engaging the material;
- Define the roles of teacher/student before each session.

During the Exam

Hopefully, you have followed the tips above, and you had a good night's rest before the exam. Being confident in how you have prepared for the exam will also dispel anxiety associated with the test process. Try and avoid getting nervous by talking with other students before the exam - their anxiety can be contagious. If you have thoroughly researched what is going to be on the exam, you should encounter few difficulties in managing your time correctly, but here are a few reminders:

- Read the directions carefully (we often think we have understood the directions, but find out after the exam, we made a superficial mistake);
- Review the entire test before beginning;
- Schedule your time base on how many points each question is worth; Answer the easiest questions first;
- Change your answer only if you are absolutely sure that your second choice is correct (second guessing can be murder).

After the Exam

Hopefully, you passed, but maybe you didn't. Where to go from here? Review the exam and count the points. Could the professor have made a simple error in calculating your score? Determine whether you missed the questions because you couldn't remember what you had studied, you'd never studied that material before or you made a careless error.

If your exam strategy failed, ask yourself why. What worked and what didn't. Be honest about whether you actually stuck to your exam strategy and decide whether you prepared correctly. Could you have started earlier? Use this analysis to decide how you are going to approach this exam the next time.

If you still have doubts about your exam preparation, or your preparation in general, keep in mind that you can always contact our [Active Listening Service](#) to speak with a consultant who can guide you in choosing the right study methods for you!