

Test/Exam Preparation

In order to excel on tests or exams, it is important to understand the material, see connections between concepts, remember crucial details, and, then, know how to apply this knowledge. In addition, successful exam writing experiences depend on a series of steps taken weeks (even months) before the test is written.

1. Know what to expect on the exam

Specific exam information may only be available closer to the test date. However, you should begin thinking about and organizing your studying for your next test the day after the last one you wrote!

- a. **Topic and materials needed.** What topics will be covered and what is the primary source of information? For example, do you need to know class, text, and lab material or a combination of the three? What about that special lecture you attended? Or the film you watched in class?
- b. **Course content.** What has the professor emphasized or stressed as important? Does the professor have an area of interest that might influence their decision to create certain kinds of questions?
- c. **Exam date and location.** When, where and how long is the test? Visit the location if it is unfamiliar to you.
- d. **Exam format.** Will the test/exam have multiple choice, matching, fill in the blank, definitions, short answer and/or essay questions? If you do not know the format, check your syllabus or ask your professor.

2. Find supports and resources

- a. **Course content.** Understanding the content of a course can sometimes be a problem. Are study groups available? Did you get a study guide with your text? If you are having a hard time with content, have you checked to see if the university provides content tutors or a help centre in that area?
- b. **Study skills and general exam preparation skills.** The Academic Learning Centre, a free service, has staff available to help you plan a study approach and/or organize necessary study materials.
- c. **Exam format.** Old tests and exams (that your professor has authorized students may access) can be an excellent resource.

3. Estimate review time

Take a careful look at your present situation including your grades, course work demands, and the test/exam's percentage or weight.

- a. **Exam weight.** What percentage of the course mark is the test worth and what grade can you realistically aim for?
- b. **Time needed.** You can determine the amount of time you need to spend studying for each test/exam by the amount of material covered and the weight of the exam. For example, if you have three exams with one worth 20%, another worth 30% and a third worth 50% then you spend the most time studying for the third exam.

- c. **Juggling your time.** Comfort level with the material is a factor. If you are struggling to maintain a C in Statistics and are studying for an exam that is worth 30% of your grade, but are easily keeping an A in Biology with an exam worth 50% then you will want to spend more time on Statistics than is indicated by the weight. Warning: don't neglect Biology entirely – make sure you spend the time you need to maintain your grade.
- d. **Evaluating exam goals.** Be realistic about your exam goal. If you currently have 45% in a course, and the final exam is worth 50%, then you will need at least 75% in your final to get 60% overall. However, if you have 45% and your final exam is worth 30% then you will need 95% to obtain the same 60% for a final grade! On the other hand, if you get 70% on this final you can still obtain a final grade of 52%.

4. Create a study schedule

- a. **Plan the order that you are going to go through the content.** It is usually best to start with the most important information. Listen carefully to your professor; that way you will be sure to know what to focus on for the test and exam. If the information is sequential, (in order to understand “b” you need to understand “a”), plan to study concepts in the logical order.
- b. **Set target dates.** Once you have estimated your review time, it is important to determine a series of concrete dates by which you will have completed your readings, note card creation, note review.

5. Review actively: organize the information

- a. **Work from one source.** Make a master set of notes or note cards that contain all the important “testable” material from class notes, texts, and labs. Make sure that you include all the major themes and sub themes in this master list.
- b. **Learn the major themes or ideas.** Now, learn all the themes and sub themes. This will help you put into context all the detail that you will need for multiple choice tests or to organize information for an essay exam.
- c. **Learn the detail.** Important details are often highlighted, italicized or in bold in the text. Professors will also emphasize what they think are key concepts, which should be added to your master list as important details.

6. Review actively: use the information

- a. **Write or recite all the important details from memory.** It is crucial to test yourself when learning new information. Cover up your main ideas and key words and see if you can provide the important detail without looking at the information.
- b. **Create your own examples.** Students get used to seeing information in a familiar context, and then do not recognize it in an unfamiliar context, such as a test. Creating your own examples pushes you to think about the information in new contexts.
- c. **Predict and then answer test questions.** A basic way to start doing this is to use headings (main ideas) and sub headings to create questions. However, it will be useful in the long run to create more sophisticated questions and you can do this by asking questions like: “what did the professor want explained;” “what are the important relationships;” “what are the primary theoretical concepts;” or “what kind of problems are you expected to solve.”
- d. **Do a variety of problems.** It is very important that you test your ability to answer practical questions in different contexts. Pick questions randomly so that you do not just pick those questions you are comfortable with. Also, it is important to do the questions without looking at the book or your notes – this gets you accustomed to solving problems in a test like situation.

- e. **Write your own short practice essays.** Get used to recalling information, organizing it and then writing it clearly under a time limit.
- f. **Make up mnemonics for difficult information.** Mnemonics are particularly useful to trigger memory of detailed, complicated, or long lists or processes.

Sources

Fleet, J., Goodchild, F., & Zajchowski, R. (1999). *Learning for success: Effective strategies for students*. (3rd ed.). Nelson Thompson Learning.

Long, E. (2000). *Conquering test writing anxiety*. Irwin Publishing.

Paul, K. (1996). *Study smarter, not harder*. Self-Counsel Press.