
Exam Tips: How to Prepare, Perform, and Succeed

Doing well on exams is not just about what you know it's a skill you can build through practice, preparation, and strategy. Below are tips for both studying effectively and writing exams with confidence.

- Use time-management tools like an agenda and a calendar, planning your time with specific and realistic tasks. Make sure you note where the exam room is and how to get there to avoid last minute panic.
- Work in short sprints rather than a marathon. For example, you could use a timer to take a five-minute break after every 25 minutes, or a ten-minute break after every 50.
- To avoid procrastination, try an easy task to get going. It's easier to keep studying than to start—but watch out for leaving the hard stuff for last. Or try the five-minute strategy: set a timer and see what you can do. If you don't get in gear, make a note and figure out potential things to check and then move on.
- Get enough sleep, stay active, eat small and frequent high-protein meals, and drink lots of water.
- Study in a distraction-free environment.

You can think of studying as having four parts: Diagnosis, Consolidation, Memorization and Self testing.

Diagnosis:

- Figure out what needs to be covered (readings, lectures, labs, key concepts, etc.) and be proactive in making a complete list of what you need to do.
- Break courses up into small pieces and prioritize your work. Consider your current ability with topics, the work needed, how long it will take and the topic's priority. Focus on core concepts and go into the rest if/when you have time.
- Ask for help sooner than later. Resources include professors, TAs, friends/study groups, learning strategists, online resources, other textbooks, and past tests and exams.
- You can often use an old exam to diagnose how much you know and what you need.

Consolidation:

- Anticipate what you might be tested on and how, and build a study guide from there.
Talk to your peers for useful ideas.
Writing out useful information early can help you learn and understand what you need to do.
- Re-reading is usually not enough. Instead, be active in your learning. Understand and (re)interpret the course's contents by creating a consolidated study guide or tools like flash cards. The more ways you can build your knowledge, the better.

Memorization and Self-testing:

- Your memory, especially if you have to hold on to details, will benefit from repetition, so try to come back to material multiple times.
- Work in several short sessions instead of one long cramming session, to make sure you know the information.
- Test yourself by re-creating your memory aids/mnemonics after some time has passed.
- In going over old work, note how questions are written and ask yourself what assumptions you made.
- Practice answering questions with a timer: you need to figure out not just the exam contents but the speed with which you have to write.

24-hour strategies:

The night before:

- Know the rules, pack your supplies (TCard, ear plugs, watch, equipment, water bottle, etc.) and stop studying at least an hour before bedtime to get a good night's sleep.
- Make sure your alarm (and backups?) are set with enough time to be stress-free.
- Visualize how things will go the next day and be positive.
- Focus on what you'll do, not the marks you'll earn.

The day of:

- Wake up early, minimize last-minute revision (although you can run through memorized lists), arrive early, and stay calm and focused.
- Remember that you can't know everything. Most is enough!

During the exam

For all exam types:

- Choose the right seat to minimize distractions, and take a few moments to collect yourself. Take some deep breaths and put intrusive thoughts aside: breathing, visualization and relaxation techniques can help with anxiety in the exam room.
Write down any memorized material immediately if you're concerned about retaining it (e.g., do a memory-dump of formulas or other details you need).
- Read over the entire exam for both contents and timing. Make sure all pages are there, read all instructions and plan your time based on the value of each section. You don't have to write the exam in order, as long as you're clear in your labelling. If you're ready to write the hard questions immediately, you can start there—but if you hit a wall, move to another, easier question.
- Pull apart and understand each question: underline or pay attention to instructional verbs (e.g., compare, contrast, criticize, define, describe, explain, interpret and summarize) and other key words that shift meanings significantly (all, always, never, none, few, many, some...)

- If your options for questions overlap/interfere because you can't discuss the same material twice, make sure you use your strengths to get the most marks.
- Re-read your exam if you have time. Only make changes to answers if you are sure!

Essay and short answer:

- Thoroughly understand the question. Maybe even re-write it or make a point-form list.
- Spend time planning a thesis and (especially if you're writing an essay) an outline.
- In general, the more packed with information—facts, figures, examples, quotations, etc.—the better. Back everything up with evidence to support your points.
- Introduce counter-arguments if relevant. Ideas do not exist in a vacuum, so acknowledge the debate or dialogue within the field, as well as the development of the thinking (e.g., philosophy, historiography).
- Keep sentences short and to the point in order to stay on topic and respond directly to the question.

Problem-based:

- Copy out problems and double-check that you haven't made any transcription errors.
- Do every step on paper, both for your own understanding and for any partial marks: doublechecking your answers to correct mistakes is especially important here.
- Remember that an exam is a points-grab. Something is better than nothing.

Multiple choice:

- Generate your own answer before reading the given options.
- Read all of the answers. When choosing between a list of answers (especially those like "a, b & c" vs. "a, b & d") or a comparison, look at how they relate to each other as well as to the question.

Use elimination. When narrowed down to two options, choose the best answer that relates most directly to the question.

References

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