



Preparing for and Taking Exams

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Ideally, an exam is a tool that allows you to consolidate your learning and to show yourself and your teacher what you have learned. For some students, though, exams are not the best way to show what they know. Other students actually prefer exams to writing papers because the task is completed within a set amount of time. The strategies offered here are for any student, whether exams are just a challenge or are very challenging.

In our conversations with students, we've found that a particularly difficulty is when students lose perspective about the meaning of an exam. An exam is not the measure of *who* you are. Sometimes an exam doesn't even give an accurate measure of what you know. A conversation with a counselor can help in sorting out dilemmas like "Even when I study hard, my exam performance doesn't improve" or "I can't seem to calm down enough to put the exam in perspective." Bureau counselors are available to talk about these and other concerns. Please call our office (617-495-2581) to schedule an appointment if you'd like to discuss any of these matters.

Overviewing the Material

A key aspect of preparing for exams is overviewing the material. Overviewing enables you to create a plan for studying so that you're spending your time on the material you need to learn rather than simply starting from the beginning and trying to study from A to Z. In this way, you're focusing your energy and time on the material that requires the most attention.

- Take time to look over the material you need to study (lecture notes, texts, problem sets, etc.) to assess your studying situation and make a plan of action. This planning is actually an essential part of your studying, rather than an extraneous piece. It helps you to prepare yourself to study in the most effective and efficient way.
- Look over the syllabus to see where this exam fits in the scheme of the course so that the material you'll study is embedded in the context and purpose of this class.
- Write down what you already feel you have learned well enough and therefore won't need to spend a lot of time studying.
- Make a list of what you need to read more thoroughly, memorize, read for the first time, etc.
- Put together the questions that you need to ask your teacher or a classmate/study partner.
- Find out what you can about the exam itself. Will it be multiple choice questions? Essay questions? Problem solving?
- Work on anticipating the unexpected. For instance, what is a question that question might throw you on the exam? Which material might you be surprised to be asked about?

Studying

Finding ways both to practice the material and to make sense of the material in your own words will help you remember the information, help you learn how to apply it, and help you learn what you think about it.

- Make up your own exam questions and answers and trade with other students.
- Review problem sets and, if available, previous exams. Don't just review the solutions; actually work through the problems to make sure you understand the mechanics.
- Invent problems or questions and answer them within time limits.
- Put ideas and concepts and definitions into your own words to see if you can explain them. Sometimes drawing a diagram or making an outline of the material can be a useful tool. The more ways you find to make the material your own, the better you will be able to remember it.

- Review your past mistakes on quizzes, problems sets, and exams. Check whether you understand why you made mistakes and do the problem again.
- If the amount that requires studying seems overwhelming, break the studying into specific observable steps (the S-O-S Strategy).¹ Think in terms of specific, 15-minute tasks that you can picture yourself doing and completing. It is easier to work in short stretches than to expect that you will work continuously for hours on the general task of “studying for the test.” When you can be very specific and concrete about the components of studying, it can be easier for you to motivate as you get to cross off each item that is accomplished.
- Active studying can be tiring, but don’t study just to soothe your conscience! No points are awarded on exams for the simple fact that you sat for hours and stared at your books! Be honest with yourself when you’re too tired or distracted to be productive.

Taking the Exam

- Do your best to take care of yourself before the exam so that you are rested. Also, try to eat before the exam so that your body is nourished and you focus on the exam rather than on being hungry. It’s hard to think your best when you’re tired and hungry.
- Before starting on the exam questions, overview the entire exam. Read the directions and note the time limits and point values of the various questions.
- Pace yourself to make sure you have enough time for each question.
- A good way to “warm up” to an exam is to do the easy questions first.
- Read the directions and the questions very carefully to make sure that you’re answering the question being asked. Beware of the “Dump Truck Response,” which is when a student answers as if asked “All I know about...” rather than “What I need to address for this question is...”
- Remember that an exam essay is not expected to look like a beautifully-crafted piece of writing. When time is short, even a few bullet points might suffice – and are usually preferable to crafting an eloquent start but leaving no time for the “meat” of the answer.

Managing Test Anxiety

A certain amount of nervousness before an exam is normal and actually can be helpful to energize and motivate you for the exam. Some people, though, experience a great deal of anxiety before and during the exam and will feel like their minds “go blank” in the exam. There are physical symptoms that come with this extra level of anxiety, such as sweating, a racing heart, queasy stomach along with negative thoughts such as “I’m going to fail.” Some of the ideas below could help you overcome the anxiety that might get in your way in an exam situation.

- It will help significantly if you have practiced beforehand under actual exam conditions: under time pressure, with no notes or books, even in the actual room that the exam will take place. If possible, try using the exam room to study so that the room is familiar to you. Sometimes it helps students to practice using the actual exam materials, such as the “blue books” used to complete the exam.
- Before the exam, try to avoid anxious classmates who might increase your own anxiety.
- If you “blank out” during the exam, take several deep breaths. Try to relax your body by tensing and then relaxing your muscles. Then, try a few different strategies to get you going again:
 - Focus very deeply on the question. Re-read the question a few times very slowly and even say it out loud quietly to yourself.
 - Free write (write whatever comes to your mind) in order to just get you going on an answer.
 - Move to a question that you do know how to address.
 - Talk to yourself to try to relieve your anxiety. Try reassuring phrases such as “I’ll do the best I can and will try to do better the next time,” “I might not know this answer, but I know other answers on the exam,” and “Remember: the exam isn’t a measure of who I am!”

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¹ The notion of specific, observable steps is drawn from Jane Burka and Lenore Yuen, authors of *Procrastination: Why You Do It, What to Do About It*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1983. The “S-O-S strategy” is a term coined by Sheila Reindl of the Bureau of Study Counsel.