ACCESS
Study Skills Tip of the Week

Are You Prepared for THE EXAM?

If you believe in miracles, then you may think that you can pass examinations without studying for them. For most of us, however, that is not possible. After all, the main purpose of examinations is to determine how effectively you have studied. If you have followed the directions for effective study, you should be ready for exams and you will have no need for miracles.

Preparing for Exams

Be prepared. Be prepared for the kind of exam you are going to take and for all the possible questions, not just some of them. Master the subject thoroughly and organize it well. Be rested, have a light meal beforehand, and be in a confident frame of mind.

How to Review

Emphasize recitation. Keep rereading to minimum. Go chapter by chapter, topic by topic. Try to recall the main ideas without referring to notes. Then check your recollections against your notes or the book. For each main heading in a chapter, do the same thing. First, recall the main points, then check yourself. If you can’t remember something or can’t understand or explain a point to yourself, then go back to the book and reread the passage covering it. As you review, turn what you review into questions. Ask yourself the questions and check your answers.

Schedule of Reviews

Surprisingly, it is easy to overestimate the time you will need for a review. If you kept up with your work, reviewing for an exam will not take a lot of time. Just allow enough time to cover everything. Keep your review times short. When your attention begins to wander, take a break. If you work too hard at reviewing a mass of material, you will have trouble organizing it and keeping it straight in your mind.

Make a definite plan for review, just as you schedule your regular study hours. For the week prior to finals, revise your regular study
schedule to accommodate reviewing. You may need to cut down on some free time but don’t cut into it too deeply. You need exercise and relaxation to manage the stress exams cause.

**The Final Review**

If you have kept up with your studying all semester, preparing for an exam is mainly a matter of review. The final review should be an intensive one. You should go over your lecture notes and textbook notes, look at the main ideas, and review lists of technical terms, formulas, dates, etc.

A review is just that—a review. It should be an attempt to recall things you have learned earlier. If you’re reading material for the first time just before an exam, you had better hope for a miracle.

**Test Anxiety**

Test anxiety is real. The best way to avoid test anxiety is to BE PREPARED. A good way to approach exams with confidence is to assess your preparation. Exams that come early in the semester let you do that. Use the first exam in a course to correct your preparation. If you don’t receive the grade you hoped for, revise your study habits, schedule, and the way you prepared for the last test.

Besides being prepared, there are a few other things you can do to reduce your anxiety. Some are little things such as getting to the exam well before it begins. Avoid being rushed: rushing aggravates your nervousness. Spend the few minutes before an exam in small talk with classmates or reading the campus paper; doing anything that will put you in a relaxed mood. Do not attempt to study or cram. Last minute frantic review while waiting for the class will only increase your panic by telling you that there are things you don’t know. As you gain confidence in your ability to cope with the stress of an exam, you will gradually lose the tendency to fall apart. Above all, don’t use the excuse of test anxiety to take the blame that belongs to poor preparation.

The last and most important thing you can do to bolster your confidence is to have a strategy for taking the exam. People who know what to do in emergencies don’t panic. This also holds true for taking exams. Ask ahead of time, what kind of exam to expect then have a plan.

**Types of Exams**

Most exams are either objective or essay. Objective exams stress your ability to recognize the right answers when you see them, not your ability to recall or organize the information you have learned.
The essay exam, on the other hand, requires you to recall. You have to organize what you know in order to present it in a coherent way. In science and math classes, you will be given problems to solve. Like essays, problems stress your ability to recall, rather than recognize, information. That is true even when they are presented in a multiple-choice or some objective format.

There are some exams that are in between traditional essay and objective exams. Completion questions, for example, require you to fill in a word or phrase. Or sometimes, the instructor will ask you to identify or describe something in a short sentence. These kinds of questions don’t require you to organize a lot of information, but also test for recall.

Essay questions don’t require you to know but they do require you to make what you know form a coherent pattern. If essay questions throw you, practice making up your own questions and try writing answers to them.

Taking Objective Exams

- Survey. Before you begin, flip through the pages to see how long it is and how many kinds of questions are on it. Note how many questions there are of each type; true-false, multiple-choice, etc. so that you can determine how to divide your time.
- Read directions carefully. Make sure you know what you are supposed to do. Indicate your answers in exactly the way the directions tell you.
- Be sure you understand how the exam will be scored. If there is no penalty for guessing, you have nothing to lose by trying to answer every question. If there is a definite penalty for guessing (taking off points for a wrong answer) follow a conservative strategy.
- Answer easy questions first. If speed is a factor in objective tests, you will want to work as rapidly as you can. After you have surveyed the test and gotten the instructions, go right to work. Some questions will be so easy you can answer them as soon as you have read the question. If you have to stop and think, put a checkmark in the margin and go on to the next question. Come back to those hard ones after you have done all the easy ones. Don’t get bogged down on a particular question. Answering the easy ones first gives you confidence to tackle the more difficult ones.
Taking Essay Exams

Planning and allocating time are even more important in essay exams than in objective exams. Read through the whole exam first and decide how much time you can afford to spend on each question. If you have a choice of which questions to answer, choose your questions before you begin. That decision should depend on a number of things; how much you know about a particular topic, how hard the question is, and above all how much how much you would have to write.

The key words in essay exams are the instructions. Usually an instructor chooses such words carefully, and expects you to do what you’re told. Students who aren’t prepared may write around a subject (tell everything they know about a subject whether relevant to the question or not). This is not only a waste of time but it tells the instructor that either you didn’t understand the question or you didn’t know what you were writing about. Know what is being asked and answer accordingly.

Important Words in Essay Questions

- **Compare**- look for similarities and differences between the things mentioned
- **Contrast**- stress the differences
- **Criticize**- make your judgment about the item in question. Stress the deficiencies
- **Define**- provide a concise and accurate definition of what is called for
- **Describe**- mention the chief characteristics of a situation or retell the essential features of a story
- **Diagram**- provide a drawing, chart, or plan
- **Discuss**- be analytical. Give reasons pro and con.
- **Evaluate**- provide both positive and negative sides of the topic
- **Explain**- give reasons for what is asked for. Provide the causes.
- **Illustrate**- use examples. Or, when appropriate, provide a diagram or figure.
- **Interpret**- translate, solve, or comment on a subject, usually giving your judgment about it
- **Justify**- give proof. Provide the reasons for your conclusions or for the statement made in the question.
- **List**- provide an itemized list. Items should be numbered.
• **Outline** - organize your answer into main points and subordinate points. While it isn’t necessary that your answer be in outline form, it helps to prepare it that way.

• **Relate** - show the connection between the things mentioned in the question. This doesn’t mean to compare, so if you are asked to relate the American and French revolutions, you are not to compare them but to show how one influenced the other.

• **Review** - provide a summary, usually a critical one. A review usually also implies commenting on important aspects of the question.

• **Summarize** - provide a summary, usually without comment or criticism

• **Trace** - describe the progress of some historical event or, where appropriate, describe the causes of some event

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For more information see:

**ACCESS A+ Program**

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