

Test Preparation

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Getting Started

Before you start on any project, including preparation for an exam, it is important to be mentally and physically prepared. As early as a week before the exam, be sure to...

- Get enough sleep. Remember that old saying about eight to ten hours of sleep a night? Being well rested is perhaps the most important, and unfortunately most overlooked, aspect of health when trying to stay focused and retain information.
- Eat healthy. Most of the time in our busy schedules, we forget to take time out for our most obvious needs. If you are not eating well, you cannot possibly expect yourself to perform well in school, or anything else. Make sure you are eating right.
- Get enough exercise. In a campus that averages a ten-minute walk from class to class, this seems relatively easy. Still, make sure you are active throughout the day. This doesn't mean joining a gym or starting a rigorous program, but make sure you keep your energy levels high during the day. This, by the way, depends on a well balanced diet, and can prevent insomnia!

These are really lifelong habits that you should employ to help you throughout the semester. Still, they are especially important before a stressful activity, like a major exam. However, it is equally important to be mentally prepared for this great task ahead. Before you even begin to study or take an exam, consider these questions:

- Is pressure from home interfering with my work?
- Do I feel consumed with a problem with a friend or significant other?
- Are my roommate and I not getting along?
- Am I feeling overly stressed because of the student organizations I belong to?
- Is this exam really worth stressing about? (see TEST ANXIETY)
- Is a recent event in my life causing my emotions to conflict with my schoolwork?
- Is my living and working conditions causing me to waste time that could be spent better?

If any of these conditions apply, that does not mean you are unfit for studying, but if outside influences are interfering, then take the time to resolve these issues. If you are studying for an exam, take time to first try to work through these problems so they are

no longer keeping you from your task. If you are taking a test, clear your mind of all stress. Tell yourself that however pressing these matters seem, they can wait two hours while you take this test. Keep these ideas in your mind as you work through the task. Keep a positive attitude, and you WILL succeed:

- I AM ready for this exam!
- I AM capable of doing my best, and that is what is important.
- I WILL succeed.
- This exam may seem difficult now, but I WILL be ready when I take it.
- I DESERVE to do the very best I can.

Getting Organized

Now you find yourself surrounded by information. You have at least one textbook, supplemental readings, lecture notes, and possibly even a study guide! You could work through the mess, but what a waste of time. Organizing the information may seem to take a little time and seem tedious, but you will end up saving time and stress in the end. Trust me on this one.

Fact Sheets:

One of the most basic ways of organizing your thoughts is by getting it all on paper. This is similar to an outline for a chapter in a textbook, or notes taken during a lecture. In fact, this is the next step in that process. Once you have all your lecture and textual notes, you may wish to further consolidate your notes to make the information more manageable. Writing the information in the form of phrases or sentences on a sheet of paper does this.

Another form of this is a word list. Oftentimes a way to test your knowledge about a particular topic is to put a key word in front of you, and the page numbers or dates of lecture that the word refers to. For example the word may be:

Psychoanalysis (pp 478-479)

This tells you that if you cannot come up with enough information regarding that subject, refer to those pages of the text.

Note cards:

The easiest way to set up information in a uniform manner is to put individual statements on note cards. They are relatively inexpensive, and you can take them anywhere. By putting one part of the concept on either side of the note card, you can create a study guide that facilitates self-testing also. Here are a few examples:

Vocabulary (this is an easy one and you can use it to memorize any terms, meanings, or translations)

Front side: To Study (Spanish)

Back side: Estudiar

Concepts (this can work if the idea takes more than a phrase to explain)

Front side: Latchkey Adolescents

Back side: Description

Mathematical formulas and equations (works similarly to a definition)

Front side: $A^2 + B^2 = C^2$

Back side: Theorem Description

Retroactive viruses (09/20)

If you are not sure what "retroactive viruses" mean or you cannot give examples of such viruses, the parenthetical note refers you to a certain lecture during which the professor discussed retroactive viruses.

Fact sheets and word lists work well when you wish to summarize information for a test. They offer quick references, and it is easy to track your progress. Unfortunately, they can often be cumbersome and easy to lose.

Be creative, remember this is YOUR system. Make sure though that nothing on one side gives away the other side. That way, you can reverse some of the cards and work both ways.

Once you have this system, you can flip through cards while going to class, talking on the phone, or doing most anything. Feel free to mark your progress by highlighting harder ones or discarding easy ones, although you want to be careful that the markings do not give away what is on the card!

Getting Refreshed

Despite the benefits of study guides, nothing beats hitting the books when you just want to become reacquainted with the main concepts and be sure you haven't forgotten anything. Rereading through the material can often bring to the surface ideas you thought you had forgotten. Unfortunately, no one has time to reread everything, so here are a few ways to efficiently work through the textbook:

- Focus on all headings and subheadings. They can help you organize your thoughts.
- Be sure you know all bold faced or italicized words. Often, these terms are vital doorways to the information.
- Review all summary sections and review questions. This can help to be sure you have successfully hit on all the points the textbook editors feel important.
- Review highlighted material. You obviously marked the book for a reason, try to figure out why. Be wary of using highlighted lines from other semesters though, you don't know for sure that the previous owner of the book got an "A" in the course.
- Check all marginal notes. They may help you relate the text to your notes. It is always good to review your thoughts to recapture the moment.
- Review aloud the key concepts. Being your own lecturer can prove to your benefit, and you get to hear yourself talk!

There are three styles of reading you can use when studying. At this stage in the game, it is important to remember that you have already drawn out the important facts on note cards. Therefore, pick a style that won't be time consuming and won't make you feel overwhelmed.

- **Comprehensive reading:** This style is what you used when developing note cards, and is obviously very tedious at this point. If you feel like you are reading the same thing over, that's probably because you are. Avoid this style at this point, because you will just grind yourself and lower your enthusiasm.

- Skimming: This is the opposite extreme, and is not ideal either. Of course it is better than nothing, and if you are short on time, do at least try to get the main ideas and points through a quick read-through. Obviously, if this is all you do, that is not conducive to a passed test.
 - Newspaper reading: Also referred to as magazine style, this method is ideal for the final read through. Because you have already taken great lengths to search out the important points and catalog the facts, you should feel comfortable just reading through the pages as if you would without a pending exam. This will help to make you feel comfortable with the text you have presumably mastered, as well as notice anything foreign to you. Of course if you do not have a general understanding of the material, or a portion of the material, this step serves as a safety net.
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Getting Psyched

After every study session, tell yourself you are going to pass this exam. Likewise, offer yourself rewards for studying. Give yourself something to look forward to after studying and after the exam, so you can feel as if you have accomplished something. Often the time you spend doing this is just as important as the studying itself. Here are a few tips to help keep your energy level high during test preparation:

- Schedule your study sessions before pleasant times of the day, like mealtimes or a favorite activity or television program.
- Have a set time schedule for studying so that you can tell yourself, "just one more hour," and there seems to be an end to the studying sessions.
- Study during times of high energy. If you are a morning person, study early. If you are an evening person, study in the evening. This works well, as you can reward yourself with going out afterwards.
- When studying, have a snack on hand. Keeping your blood sugar high can help you stay alert and concentrate.
- Plan something special after your exam. Whether you pass or fail, the ordeal of the preparation and experience of the exam is worth a break. Make it a special occasion with friends. Make sure you give yourself a higher reward for actually finishing the exam than you did for studying.
- Don't worry about the outcome of the exam after you take it, there's nothing you can do about it now. If you did the best you could, you have nothing to worry about!

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