

PREPARING FOR FINAL EXAMS

Some final exams cover the last unit of work, while other finals cover both old and new material; still others include all the material that was covered in the semester. Preparing for all types of final exams requires good time management skills and good test preparation strategies. This handout will help you decide what to study, when to study, and how to stay motivated.

How should you prepare?

Start your preparation early. Two to three weeks before your first final, map out the amount of time you will need to complete your assignments before the end of the semester. You need to complete most of your regular work about a week before it is actually due in order to start studying for your finals at least five days before the first one is scheduled. By staying ahead of your reading, completing assignments early, and working ahead, you can make the extra time you will need.

Make academics your first priority and manage your time efficiently. Instead of easing off at the end of the semester, you need to work hard the last two or three weeks to finish coursework in order to give yourself time to rest and prepare for your finals. Academic goals must come first. Make "To Do" lists or keep daily calendars to record when assignments are due, to schedule regular study hours, and to set daily goals. To keep you motivated, break down tasks, vary study hours and subjects, and plan rewards for yourself.

Set priorities for exams. Know where you stand in each course in order to decide how much time and effort you need to put into studying for each final exam. You should put the greatest effort into courses in which you have borderline grades. For example, if you are close to an "A" in a course, focus your effort and time into this course to raise your grade to an "A" grade; this course is a high priority. Or, if you have a weak "B" in a course, you should concentrate on strengthening this "B" grade; this is another priority. If you have a solid "C" in a course, you should study to maintain this "C" average; this would not be as high a priority. By setting your priorities appropriately, you may be able not only make the best use of your time and effort, but you may also improve your GPA.

Attend all classes. Do not miss class just before finals. Many instructors squeeze extra information into their lectures during the last week or two of classes in order to present all of the material that will be on the final exam; others review or discuss what will be on the final as well as what won't be on the final. Knowing what to study and what you don't have to spend time on can help you use your study time effectively.

Reduce test anxiety. A little test anxiety is normal, but you can do things to keep anxiety from interfering with your test performance. Talk to your instructor, a counselor, or the Learning Skills staff about test-taking preparation and strategies. Also, you might ask some of your friends to share their experiences with final exams. Prioritize your time and efforts and map out an overall study schedule. The best way to reduce your feelings of anxiety is to be well prepared.

Finals Week Preparation

Do you prepare for one final exam at a time? Do you study all day for one exam, take it, and then start on the next. After one or two days, it becomes hard to maintain that kind of pace. You may get tired of the long days and nights of study and give up on later exams. By spacing your study over several days, you can study for each of your exams using the Five-Day Study Plan, and at the same time, maintain your motivation throughout finals week.

Make a schedule for your finals. Use a five-day study plan in which you count back five days from each of your final exam dates to determine when to start studying for each exam. For example, if you have an exam on Wednesday, start studying for it on the preceding Saturday. Schedule blocks of time each day to study--divide the day by studying in the morning, in the afternoon, and in the evening. Study the (over)

same material at the same time of each day. This time schedule will help you to separate course material from one exam from that of your other courses, thereby preventing some of the memory interference that often occurs during finals week. Study your hardest subject the time when you are the most alert. Each study block should be followed by at least a one-hour break. You need time to rest and absorb the information before you resume studying.

Prepare for comprehensive finals. A comprehensive final test includes all of the material from the semester. Find out how much old material will be covered compared to how much new material will be included. For a comprehensive final exam, space your study and allocate the appropriate amount of time to the amount of material to be studied. The proportion of time spent on old and new material should reflect the weight of each of the parts of the final.

In the example below, the final will be composed of 100 multiple-choice items covering 12 chapters and is 25% comprehensive. There will be 25 questions based on old material (Chs.1-9) and 75% (75 questions) based on new material (Chs.10, 11, and 12). The number of questions from each chapter indicates how specific the questions will be. Usually the fewer the questions from each chapter, the more general they tend to be. A quick review of the old material followed by intense study on the new material is necessary.

Sample Study Plan:

<i>Day 1--Ch. 9 (general questions--quick review)</i>
<i>Day 2--Ch. 10 (specific questions--intense study)</i>
<i>Day 3--Ch.11 (specific questions--intense study)</i>
<i>Day 4--Ch. 12 (specific question--intense study)</i>

Use active strategies to study. When you review your text and lecture materials, write and recite so you can move information into long-term memory. Use flashcards, self-tests, and recitation to test your understanding of the material. If you used word question cards for each of your chapters, review them for your final. You don't need to review the text again if you already took notes on your textbook and prepared study sheets combining the information from your text and your notes. Rather than rereading the notes you took and the study sheets or maps, etc. that you prepared, create new ones by using your notes and study sheets as your starting points to create new notes. In the process of making new study sheets, you will effectively review the material. If you made self-tests for each chapter, use them again to find out what you already know and what you still need to learn.

Stay motivated. If you get discouraged or tired, get into a positive frame of mind and plan rewards to help you stay on course with your studying. Focus on being with other motivated people. For example, join a study group or meet with friends who also are studying hard for final exams. Avoid distractions that will pull you away from studying. Alcohol and too little sleep can cause memory interference which will prevent you from sticking to a study schedule and concentrating during exams.

Make your best effort on each exam. Concentrate on one exam at time. Do not think about yesterday's exam or tomorrow's exam. Focus your effort and energy on your current exam. Relieve anxious feelings by trying some strategies for relaxation. After each exam, take a break before you start studying for your next exam. If you are upset about your performance on a particular exam, accept that you may not achieve your goal in that class. Do not give up on studying or let yourself be distracted from preparing for another exam. You may surprise yourself by doing better than you expected on one of your other exams.

Monitor your progress. After each exam, write down a few notes about how you thought you did on the exam. Note areas where you think you had difficulty and review your notes or study sheets to check your answers. Then you can decide whether or not the plan that you set up or the strategies that you used were effective. If they were, you may want to use those strategies again in a similar class. If they weren't effective, you should revise them for future exams. Seek assistance from your past or current instructors, your counselor, or the Learning Skills staff for tips on how to better prepare for final exams in the coming semesters.