

Exam Preparation

Exam preparation should be ongoing and start the first week of classes using a variety of the techniques previously outlined in this manual. See the 'Principles of Learning & Memory' and 'Study Strategy' sections for specific learning techniques.

During the course:

- Attend all classes.
- Take clear, complete and organized notes.
- Keep up with homework and reading assignments.
- Find at least one study partner in each class.
- Ask for help when you need it (from instructors, peers, tutors).
- Decide where and when you study most effectively.
- Develop an attitude that all study is "exam" study.

Be diligent about ongoing review:

- Begin to review the first week of class.
- Review all new material daily and weekly.
- Work at understanding the material fully, not just memorizing it.
- Focus on what the material means and how it can be applied.
- Link new material to previously learned material.
- Frequently test yourself on your knowledge of the material
- Look for the "big picture"- how could this apply to industry or business?

(Thorough ongoing preparation is the best remedy for exam anxiety.)

Take care of yourself. If your physical, emotional and psychological needs are neglected you will not be able to achieve your full potential.

One to two weeks before the exam:

Have a plan for your MAJOR review

- Begin 1 – 2 weeks before major exams.
- Prioritize what you need to know based on what will be on the exam, the course outline, LOGS (learning outcome guides), and the weighting of each exam.
- Ask your instructor what the exam format will be (e.g. multiple choice, short answer).

- Do a 30-minute overview of each course.
- Create review tools such as checklists, summaries, flash cards or mock exams.
- Plan a realistic schedule for each exam and prioritize according to the exam's weighting and difficulty, as well as how you are doing in the course.

Study ACTIVELY

- Gather all resources needed to prepare for the exam (text, notes, complete assignments/labs).
- Do intense review for all the topics on your list; do not just read and re-read the material.
- Practice the tasks you will do on the exam.
- The remainder of your study time should be spent utilizing active study approaches like putting materials in your own words, teaching the material to someone else, making flash cards, utilizing mnemonic devices, and creating visuals such as concept maps or diagrams.
- Review old quizzes, exams, problem questions and chapter-end questions.
- Experiment with different memory and learning techniques to see which works best for you.
- Don't spend much time on what you already know.
- Test yourself frequently to determine what you truly know – recite or write what you know.
- Over learn material – go beyond basic recognition or marginal recall - put material in your own words to ensure genuine understanding - practice applying the material using problems, case studies, etc.

Day(s) before the exam:

- Check the location and time of the exam.
- Get adequate sleep and exercise.
- Limit coffee, alcohol, and caffeinated food/beverages.
- Eat well balanced meals.
- Get all you exam “tools” ready the night before – have them waiting by the door.
- Maintain a positive attitude.

Day of the exam:

- Do not try to learn something new hours before the exam; in fact for most students it is best not to study on the day of the exam.
- Be careful not to compare yourself to others or berate yourself for not studying more.
- If you feel overly anxious take steps to relax yourself such as deep breathing or a brisk walk.
- Arrive early but not so early that you get anxious.
- Avoid talking to other students (anxiety spreads).

How to Cram (if you absolutely have to!)

- Be realistic. Prioritize and focus on the basics (e.g. chapter summaries, review sheets).
- Cram as close to the exam as possible (but not all night).
- Get some sleep.

Tips for Exam Writing and Nervousness

- Be extremely well prepared for exams by reviewing daily and weekly.
- Use effective exam preparation and writing techniques.
- Test yourself at regular intervals to determine if you truly know and understand the material.
- Get adequate exercise, nutrition and rest, especially before exams.
- Identify and remove sources of anxiety.
- When you first receive your exam, look over it quickly to get a feel for the questions. Read directions carefully.
- Use a system to quickly categorize questions into those you know well, those you know something about, and those you know little about.
- Start with the questions you know well.
- Underline key terms and information.
- Work at a reasonable pace, even if you don't complete the exam.
- Use all the exam time allotted.
- Check over your exam to be sure that you answered all questions, that your calculations are correct and that your answers line up with the answer sheet/ Scantron.
- Change answers only if you are sure of the change.
- If you are so nervous that you blank out on exams or have intense physical symptoms see *Managing Exam Anxiety* (page 80). It is also advised that you see a counsellor at Student Counselling.

Strategies for Exam Writing

Use the First Five Minutes Wisely

- ❑ Skim read the entire exam.
- ❑ Note mark allocation for each section/question.
- ❑ Ensure that you have the entire exam (all pages).
- ❑ Develop a mark per minute ratio (e.g. 1.5 hour exam – 90 marks = 1 mark per minute) and occasionally check the clock to see that you are on track with time. However don't check the time too frequently and don't check if it causes you to panic.
- ❑ Write out any formula/acronyms before you start.
- ❑ Use a system to quickly categorize questions into those you know well, those you know something about, and those you know little about.
- ❑ Start with the questions you know well.

General Exam Writing Tips

- ❑ Read directions carefully.
- ❑ Read questions carefully (re-read if necessary).
- ❑ Be clear on what the question is asking and make sure you are answering the actual question before you begin answering. Don't read more into the question than is there.
- ❑ Underline key terms and information.
- ❑ Start with some "easy" questions.
- ❑ Write legibly.
- ❑ Spend time according to mark allocation – don't spend too much time on low mark questions.
- ❑ Work at a reasonable pace, even if you don't complete the exam.
- ❑ Use all the exam time allotted (it's not a contest to see who can leave the exam room first).
- ❑ Check over your exam.
- ❑ Ignore what others are doing (especially "early leavers").
- ❑ Don't compare yourself to others.
- ❑ Don't discuss the exam with others (before or after the exam).

Before You Hand in Your Exam

- ❑ Review your answers.
- ❑ Check your calculations and units.
- ❑ Change answers only if you are sure of the change.
- ❑ Ensure your name is on all pages.
- ❑ Check that you've answered all questions.
- ❑ Check that your answers line up on the answer sheet.

Hints for Answering Specific Types of Questions

Multiple Choice

- Cover the answers.
- Read the question carefully.
- Underline key words.
- Restate the question in your own words.
- Answer the question in your head and **then** look for the “best” answer.
- Read all answers before choosing.
- Use the process of elimination, treating each answer as a true/false.
- Choose the best answer.

Problem/Formula

- Identify the type of problem.
- Think of the process and outline the steps.
- Underline the key facts/information.
- Plug facts into the process, crossing out facts as you use them.
- Show all steps and calculations.
- Ensure that your answer is in the correct units.

Matching

- Do easy questions first.
- Cross out answers as used.
- Use the process of elimination.

True/False

- Make sure that all parts of the answer are true before marking it “True”.
- Beware of absolute words (e.g., all, always, never...).

Open Book

- Be very familiar with materials; use flags to divide topics and mark important information. Cross reference material where necessary
- Practice questions while using the materials.
- Avoid being lulled into a false sense of security because you have your notes available. You still need to study the material thoroughly and commit some information to memory.

Essay

- Read essay topics carefully. Be sure you understand the question and that you answer it in your essay.
- Create an outline prior to writing.
- Ensure you understand essay format. Ideas need to be organized.
- Proof read before you hand in the exam.

Managing Exam Anxiety

Anxiety before exams is a normal state. It motivates you to stay alert and do your best. Exam anxiety, however, is the state of being so nervous during a test that you don't do your best and you lose marks even though you know you've studied and are well prepared.

During the semester:

- Exercise regularly, every day if possible; continue exercising during exam periods even if you do less exercise. You don't need to have a rigorous, time-consuming exercise program. Any exercise that increases your heart rate for twenty minutes (walking quickly, biking, dancing) will work against stress.
- Get sufficient sleep.
- Get into a regular routine – regular sleep and waking times, regular meal times and regular times for exercise and study help you remain calm and give you a feeling of being in control of your life.
- Do something that relaxes you every day – listening to music, reading fiction, yoga, meditation, a hot bath ...
- Have fun every day – do enjoyable activities; try to have at least one good laugh every day.
- Take care of external sources of stress such as paying bills, preparing meals ahead, and letting people know you won't be available during exam times.
- Learn relaxation techniques to use while studying and taking tests (e.g. deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, visualization, positive self-talk).
 - Deep breathing: breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose and feel your stomach (not your chest) extend. Hold for a few seconds. Pull in your stomach, forcing the air out slowly while thinking "relax". Repeat 2 or 3 times. If you become good at this technique it is easy to use during an exam.
 - Visualization: imagine a calming place (e.g., beach, forest). Imagine what you see, hear and feel.
 - Muscle relaxation: Tense and release each muscle group in your body individually, starting at your feet and working up to your head.
 - Positive self talk: repeat positive messages such as, 'I can stay calm and relaxed'.

- Thought stopping – when you find yourself worrying, thinking negatively or thinking thoughts that have led to anxiety in the past, yell “stop” in your head and think neutral or positive thoughts. Over time you can train yourself to think more positively.
- Consider which people in your social network make you feel calm and which people make you feel stressed. Spend the bulk of your social time around calm people at times, especially when you know a stressful life situation (e.g., exam time) is coming up.
- Learn to laugh at yourself.

While studying:

- Allow yourself plenty of time to accomplish all the things you have to do before the test. Develop a study schedule broken down into manageable steps. Take one step at a time in order not to overwhelm yourself.
- Set realistic goals for each study session.
- Build up confidence by reviewing the material frequently. To an extent, over learning is the best insurance against going blank on an exam.
- Perfectionists are prone to exam anxiety. Strive for excellence but not for perfection. Set limits on the amount of time you are going to study and on the amount of detail you can learn.
- Spread review over several days rather than cramming.
- Study for a maximum of 50 minutes and then take a 5 to 10 minute break. If possible alternate the subjects you study each 50-minute session.
- Make sure you are “really” studying. Most students prepare for a test by reading their notes or textbooks. As you read you may feel that you know (understand) what the author is saying. Understanding what you are reading at the moment does NOT mean that you know it well enough to remember it for a test when the book isn't there to help you. By just reading to study you may find yourself going “blank” when trying to answer a test item. Study actively by thinking of potential exam questions and the correct answers, and by making sure you can recite or jot down key concepts with your textbook closed.
- Test yourself frequently. Use old quizzes, assignments, chapter-end questions or tests that you make up from your study material. Doing frequent mock tests increases confidence and lowers exam anxiety.

- Devise a system for practicing rapid problem solving as part of your review for the test. Usually homework problems are solved at a leisurely rate while tests require rapid problem solving. Being experienced at working under time pressure can help alleviate exam anxiety.

Prior to the test:

- Many students find it helpful to go for a brisk 5 to 10 minute walk right before the test. This helps with deep breathing and relaxation.
- If you have problems with anxiety, do NOT drink caffeine (e.g., coffee, some teas, dark colas). Caffeine mimics and escalates the symptoms of anxiety.
- Arrive early so you can sit where you are most comfortable, get organized, and avoid people who are anxious and might cause you to doubt your knowledge. Don't arrive so early that you have a lot of time to let your stress build up.
- Do not let yourself get into a negative mindset such as, "I always panic on exams" or "I blanked out last time so I will blank out again". Instead think thoughts such as, "I know my material", "I can stay calm and relaxed", etc.

During the test:

- When you receive the test look it over, read the directions twice, and then organize your time efficiently. Don't rush through the test, but work at a comfortable pace and don't worry about how far along classmates are.
- Look over the questions to familiarize yourself with the test. Underline key words or phrases in the test directions. Many students with exam anxiety make errors because they don't read the question thoroughly.
- At all times try to focus on the process of answering the question rather than on the end result.
- If you go blank, skip the question and go on. Find some questions you can answer.
- Regard a lapse of memory as perfectly normal; do not let it throw you into a panic. If you block on answering one question, leave it for awhile and return to it later.

- Don't panic when you don't know an answer. Eliminate options you know are incorrect and then make an educated guess. Come back to the question later – you may get hints from other questions, or remember the answer when you're not struggling to find it.
- Use deep breathing, visualization, muscle relaxation and/or positive self-talk if your stress starts to rise.
- Thinking of something humorous is a great way to relieve anxiety.
- Utilize positive self talk. Come up with positive statements that help to keep you calm, such as, "This is only one test", "I am familiar with this material", "I can do it", etc.
- Distraction techniques such as saying the alphabet backwards, thinking of the birth dates of your siblings, etc., can help bring your focus back if you are experiencing anxiety.
- Sipping water or chewing gum can relieve tension for some students.
- Changing positions can help you relax.
- If you find yourself blanking on everything take some deep breaths, focusing just on your breathing, and then start to jot down some things you know about the course. This should trigger other information. Keep your breathing slow and deep.
- Don't panic when other students start handing in their papers. There's no reward for being the first person done.
- Don't rush through the exam – it is better to do your best on 80% of the exam than complete the exam and make a lot of errors.

Evaluate your anti-anxiety strategies after the exam. Make sure to keep incorporating those that worked. See a counsellor to get further advice on managing anxiety.

Keep it Positive: Three things you can do to build a positive attitude

Thinking positively can actually enhance your learning, help to motivate you and make you a lot more fun to be around. We all carry on a silent self-dialogue and for many of us a lot of that dialogue is negative. Self-statements like, "I'm too lazy", "I'm a procrastinator" or "I can't do this", can become self-fulfilling prophecies. Positive statements such as, "I am self-motivated", "I can do it", and "I love to learn", can also be self-filling. Whenever you find yourself thinking negatively, try substituting a realistic, positive statement.

Challenge your faulty reasoning. Statements like, "I always fail" are simply not true. Think of examples where you have been successful. Focus on your strengths and your goals. If you think that you haven't been successful in a particular area in the past then examine what you can do differently this time and incorporate your new strategies.

Visualize success. Get a clear picture of yourself achieving your goal. Try to make your visualization as specific as possible. A clear picture of success can help you keep going when you are feeling overwhelmed.

Note: An exam is simply an opportunity to show what you know and to get feedback on that knowledge. It is not an evaluation of your self worth!