



Preparing for Exams

Think of an exam as a “performance” or a “game,” and exam prep as rehearsal or a scrimmage—authentic practice.

Come up with a game plan

- Develop a realistic study schedule based upon clear and specific goals for each session. Write down where you’ll study, at what time, and exactly what you intend to do with that time. Note: don’t plan to cram—studies show that cramming leads to higher stress and lower scores. Think in terms of a five-day plan for each course.
- Determine available study time, blocks of time for specific tasks, and study with a sense of determination. Schedule sleep, meals, and (some) down time. Sleep deprivation reduces efficiency.
- Organize your study area and materials, and make necessary plans (e.g., with study group members).

Think like a professor

- Grasp the big picture of the courses and your professor’s objectives.
- Identify the underlying logic of the course design by focusing on main principles, themes, and concepts first, then look for evidence (details, examples) supporting and explaining them.
- Pay particular attention to concepts professors focused upon in class or in homework, quizzes, problem sets, and other assignments.

Predict exam questions from your lecture notes, problem sets, precept discussions, and readings.

- Formulate central questions that link large chunks of course material. They will usually be taken from main principles and concepts—including how various concepts relate to each other. Practice answering them.

- Identify and classify information that might show up in an identification or short-answer section. Prepare yourself to show what you know concisely.

Consider where your weaknesses lie

- What concepts remain unclear? Which problems do you routinely struggle to solve? Targeting your studying will help you make the most of the time you have for each course.
- Evaluate not merely whether you “know” the material, but whether you have mastered it and can apply your knowledge in ways your professor will ask of you.

Create study tools

- Put together reading summaries that capture main points of texts and relate them to course themes.
- Develop charts of theorems, mechanisms, or principles rewritten in your own words.
- Create a course blueprint that organizes main themes and concepts of the course.
- Make problem packets in which you gather and organize similar problems from the course and their solutions to study with.

For quantitative courses, work through problems

- Work through previous assignments, the ends of textbook chapters, or old exams.
- Don’t think of each problem as unique; instead, look for similarities among them and common techniques for solving them.
- Don’t consult the answer key until you’ve tried to solve the problem yourself. Work under test-like conditions whenever possible.

For essay exams, practice writing your responses

- Predict questions and outline your answers in preparation for the exam.
- Identify specific examples/evidence you will use to support your main points.
- If the exam is in class, time your practice runs to get a sense of the depth/quality of essays you’ll be able to produce in the time allotted.
- Evaluate your practice efforts (outlines/drafts) and consider how to refine your response.
- Practice producing your answers or outlines, not merely reviewing material.

Try to explain difficult material to someone else

- You can do this with a study partner or in study groups. You can also work with others to generate questions.
- If you can explain it, you’ve gone beyond merely memorizing the material.

Take practice exams

- Take an old exam and note what types of skills and techniques are tested, then practice these.
- Use “test post-mortem” materials to turn your own previous tests into a study sheet.
- Time yourself and use only the materials you will have at the exam; don’t refer to “solutions” or a study guide—you won’t have them on the actual exam.
- Review your answers and focus on filling gaps in your skills and knowledge.

Don’t be afraid to ask your instructors and TAs for help

- If after reviewing, you still don’t understand something, take advantage of office hours or review sessions to ask questions about the material.
- Asking about the format of the exam is okay, but don’t ask what’s going to be on the test.
- Remember to eat well, exercise, and get enough sleep. You’ll study and perform better.