

Counselling & Learning Support

North Vancouver Campus

Student Success Workshops

Exam Preparation and Memory Strategies



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Exam Preparation & Memory Strategies

At the post-secondary level, exam preparation begins from the very first day of classes and involves attending classes regularly, keeping up with assignments, reviewing lecture notes and reading material on a regular basis, and asking when information is unclear. Students who engage in these study habits are able to spend the time prior to an exam, reviewing information they have already studied and learned. Students who do little studying throughout the term end up cramming, which according to Linda Wong (2003), *“is an attempt to learn large amounts of information in a short period of time”* (p. 155). Due to the fact that it takes time to process and learn new information well, cramming usually results in poor test performance.

In addition to studying regularly throughout the term, the following test-preparation strategies will help you avoid cramming, prepare for exams, and increase your test performance:

Preparing to Study

Find Out About the Test

Several weeks before the exam, in order to figure out how much time you need to study and how you might approach your review, find out as much about the exam as possible. The type of information that is helpful to know is:

- What topics will be covered
- What type of questions will be asked (multiple-choice, true/false, short-answer, essay, etc.)
- How many of each type of question will be asked and how are the marks weighted
- What percentage of your final grade is the exam worth

Organize your Study Material

Before you start to review, organize your material by the major topics covered in the course. These topics are usually indicated in your course outline. For each topic, identify and group together the class notes, textbook readings and any other material that needs to be reviewed related to the topic. This becomes a meaningful cluster of inter-related information that should be learned and placed in memory as a unit.

Make a Study Plan

Once you know the type and quantity of material that will be covered in the exam, you then need to develop a study plan to ensure that you have time to review all the necessary material before the test. The amount of time you need to conduct your final review will depend on the amount of material you have to cover, the difficulty level of the material, how much the exam is worth, and how many other exams you have to study for at the same time. Once you have decided how much time you need, add a

couple of extra days as a cushion and always remember to leave the last day to go over your review material one last time.

To develop a study plan, follow the steps below:

1. Make a list of all the topics you have to cover.
2. For each topic make a list of and organize all the materials and resources you will need to conduct your review.
3. For each topic, set specific dates and times that you will review the material. Write these down in the form of a checklist or use a weekly study schedule to record when and what you will review.
4. After each study session check off what you completed so you can see your progress.
5. Adjust the plan as necessary.
6. Plan a small reward for the end of each study session and a big reward for after you have written the test.

Exam Review Strategies

Make Summary Notes

Summary notes are a special set of notes that you create specifically to study for tests. As you review your material some of the material will seem familiar and will require little review while other material will seem difficult and will require more in depth study. Material that you need to review more should be placed into a set of summary notes. These notes should then be reviewed on a regular basis until the material becomes familiar. Summary notes should only include the most important points and can be taken in a variety of formats. Summary notes can include:

- A list of important points
- An outline of main points and supporting points
- A category/comparison chart
- Flash Cards
- Diagrams
- Mind maps or Hierarchies
- Time Lines

Practice Answering Possible Test Questions

Answering practice test questions is a powerful test preparation strategy, as you start to think about what might be asked and get to practice pulling together answers in a non-stressful situation. This reduces your anxiety at test-time as some of the questions may be familiar. Answering practice test questions also gives you valuable feedback as to which concepts and ideas you know well and which requires more review. The following resources can be used to practice answering test questions:

- Textbooks. Modern textbooks often include review quizzes at the end of each chapter or important concept.

- Study Guides. Many textbooks have an accompanying study guide which contains chapter summaries and quizzes. These study guides come as books, are on a CD-Rom, or are available on a website specified in the textbook.
- Past quizzes or exams taken in the course and past assignments. Keep your old tests and assignments through out the term and then redo them as a way of reviewing for mid-terms and finals.
- Copies of past mid-terms and finals (if available). Although the questions will not be the same on the current exam, old exams give you an idea of the nature of the questions asked and what topics are important.

In addition to using already available resources for answering practice test questions, you can also make up your own tests by predicting your own test questions. You can predict your own test questions in the following ways:

- Turn textbook headings and sub-headings into questions
- Create questions suggested by your lecture notes
- Form a study group and take turns asking and answering possible test questions from the course material

Participate in Review Sessions and/or Create a Study Group

Always attend the exam review class for each course. This is an important part of the preparation process, as the review class provides you with valuable insight into what will be on the exam, gives you a chance to ask last minute questions about confusing material, and allows you to hear the questions of other students, questions you may not have thought to ask yourself.

In addition to attending the review class, another excellent review strategy is to conduct your own review sessions by getting together with other students in the course and creating a study group. Study groups can meet throughout the term or can be created right before an exam to review important concepts. Although there are many different ways study groups can be used for exam review purposes, Linda Wong (2003) in her text *Essential Study Skills* suggests the following three review approaches:

- Each group member is responsible for summarizing a specific chapter and conducting a discussion on the material.
- Each group member prepares a specific number of practice test questions plus the answers and brings them to the group.
- Each group member brings a specific study tool to the group to help facilitate the review. These tools may be question/answer index cards, terminology index cards, teaching a concept on the board, diagrams, summary notes, etc.

Utilize Memory Techniques and Strategies

Whether you are making summary notes, answering practice test questions, or participating in a study group you should keep in mind and apply the following memory techniques to help yourself remember and retain the material you are studying:

Study actively and often	You are more likely to remember material if you write it down or say it out-loud rather than if you merely read it or hear it. It also takes time for information to be processed in memory, so you will need to go over what you are learning several times in order to retain it.
Make sure you understand the material	If you understand what you're trying to learn, you'll find that you can remember it better and for a longer period of time.
Use association	When learning something new, try to relate it to something similar that you are already familiar with i.e. Italy looks like a boot. Also link together in your mind, concepts & examples, text & pictures, questions & answers, etc.
Make up examples	When learning general principles, try to make up examples of your own. In addition to helping you remember the principle better, this will also help you check your understanding.
Use your visual memory	This can involve looking at the diagrams provided, creating a mental image or drawing a graph or diagram of the material you are trying to remember.
Use color	Use color to stimulate your visual memory. Color code diagrams, use different colour highlighters or pens, and put difficult material on brightly coloured paper.
Group items into categories	If you have to learn a long list of things, try to group similar items together. To aid memory further, attach a label to each category or grouping.
Chunk material into small units	When we try to learn too much material at once we overload short-term memory. To avoid this, break what you are learning down into smaller chunks, learn one chunk at a time, and then put the chunks back together to re-create the whole.
Be selective	Most of the time you will not be able to or be required to memorize every detail. Concentrate on general concepts and a few examples to go with each. Pay particular attention to information the teacher has indicated as important.
Space your study	You are more likely to remember if you study over several days, weeks, and months, than if you cram
Use key words	For each concept or idea you are learning, select several main words that when recalled trigger other related information, facts, and details
Add numbers	When learning a list of items, enumerate the list as this will help you in recalling all of the items.
Create rhymes & sayings	"In 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue." "Alfred Nobel had quite a fright when he discovered dynamite." Create your own little sayings to remember difficult facts and details.
Use acronyms	An acronym is a catchword you make using the first letter of the keywords in a list of items or words. For example, you could make the acronym STAB to help you remember the four voices in a quartet: alto, bass, tenor, and soprano.
Use acrostics	An acrostic is often used when an acronym cannot be made. An acrostic is a catch phrase or silly sentence you make using words that start with the same letters as the keywords on your list. For example, you could make the phrase "Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally" to remember the order of mathematical operations: <i>Parentheses, Exponents, Multiplication, Division, addition, and Subtraction.</i>
Make it all about YOU	Relate what you are learning to yourself in any way you can. Think of a personal example, imagine yourself doing what you are learning about, etc.

As you can see, preparing for an exam takes planning and hard work. However, if you follow these guidelines and suggestions, you should find that your study time will pay off and that your exam results will improve. As with all study skills you will need to adjust your exam review approach and strategies to the subject and exam at hand, as well as to your own individual learning style.

For more information or help with preparing for exams and memory, please make an appointment with the Learning Specialist at the North Vancouver Campus by calling 604.984.1744.

Adapted from: Wong L. (2003). *Essential Study Skills*: Chapter 6. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.