

Preparing For Exams

Exams often form a big part of your academic assessment. As well as studying your course materials, there are many ways that you can prepare for exams to increase your confidence and help you take the right approach. The following are general guidelines to help you prepare for exams.

1. Types of exams

Different types of exams require different study strategies.

Essay exams

These usually focus closely on a couple of topics, so if you are sitting an exam that requires answers in essay form, find out how many questions you have to answer so you can focus your study. For example, if you have to answer four questions, select and study four topics in detail plus one extra.

Multiple choice exams

These exams usually involve a broad overview of a course, so tend to cover lecture and tutorial material. Use the course outline as a framework for study and to identify the main themes and concepts.

Open book exams

One of the biggest myths about open book exams is that you don't need to study for them. While these exams don't test your memory, they do test your ability to find and use information, solve problems and apply knowledge effectively. Make sure you are fully familiar with your texts and notes and know where to find necessary information.

2. Organise your time

Don't leave it until the last minute. While some students do seem to thrive on last-minute cramming, it's widely accepted that this is not the best way to approach an exam. Set out a timetable for your study. Write down how many exams you have and the days on which you have to sit them. Then organize your study accordingly. You may want to give some exams more study time than others, so find a balance that you feel comfortable with.

Fill out a weekly study planner and use it to organise your time. Cross out the hours when you can't study because of other commitments (e.g. lectures or work). Then plan one-hour time slots to use for exam revision.

Make use of short study times. Fifteen minutes can be ideal for revising lecture notes or looking through note cards. Use time spent on the bus or train to review your course materials.

Don't study for longer than 50 minutes without a break. It's better to study for short intense periods with sustained concentration than long blocks of time when you are tired and not working effectively.

Work out when you can study most effectively. Are you more alert in the morning or evening? When in your day can you find quiet time and space? Schedule study times that suit your personal rhythms.

Don't study when you're really tired. It's better to get a solid night's sleep after a short study period, than to push on until 2am. You won't remember much and will be less effective the next day.

3. Organise your study space

Make sure you have enough space to spread your textbooks and notes out. Have you got enough light? Is your chair comfortable? Are your computer games out of sight?

Try and get rid of all distractions, and make sure you feel as comfortable and able to focus as possible. For some people, this may mean almost complete silence, for others, background music helps. Some of us need everything completely tidy and organized in order to concentrate, while others thrive in a more cluttered environment. Think about what works for you, and take the time to get it right

4. Organise your subject material

Gather the materials for each course. Make sure you have a complete set of course notes and copies of any handouts, slides or visuals. Make sure they correspond to the topics in the course outline.

If you've missed lectures, borrow copies of lecture notes from other students and review any lecture slides and handouts available. Make sure that you have copies of any extra readings or materials distributed in classes. Once you have a complete set of course materials, you can study by topic.

5. Rewrite your notes

Rewriting your notes helps you to remember them. Don't just copy out your original notes—you'll end up simply memorizing the exact wording instead of the actual concepts. The key is to read and think about the contents of your notes, what you noted down and why (in what way it is important), how to express it most efficiently and memorably, and then re-write them in your own words.

When you finish studying a section of notes, ask yourself questions relating to the material to see if you remembered what you just read. It can help to answer your questions out loud as if you were trying to explain them to someone else.

6. Study to suit your learning style

If you're a visual learner, diagrams and pictures can help you remember. Auditory learners should listen to lecture recordings or make their own recordings of notes that they can listen to later. If you are a physical person explain key ideas aloud to yourself while moving around. Explore different ways to help you remember key facts and to increase your understanding of the main concepts.

7. Work out what you don't understand

Clarify the meaning of any words or concepts you don't understand before trying to study them. If you aren't clear about what information means, memorising it won't help.

Prioritise the hardest subjects first in each study session. Allocate more time to studying the subjects you find most difficult.

8. Form a study group

Get together with friends for a study session. You may have questions that they have the answers to and vice versa. As long as you make sure you stay focused on the topic for an agreed amount of time, this can be one of the most effective ways to challenge yourself.

8. Set limits

Don't study for longer than 50 minutes without taking a break. It is better to study for a short intense period of time with sustained concentration than long periods of time when you are tired and not engaging well with the material

Don't try to study the entire course in one sitting. Divide the subject up into topics and aim to study one 'chunk' at each study session.

9. Set study goals

Set yourself a goal for each study session. Write them down as soon as you begin your study session, or set them at the end of the study session for next time. For example;

I will read through and summarise chapters 3 and 4.

I will work through five equations.

I will learn the main concepts that were discussed in lectures from weeks 2-4

10. Take breaks

While you may think it's best to study for as many hours as possible, this can actually be counterproductive. If you were training for a marathon, you wouldn't try and run 24 hours a day. Likewise, studies have shown that for long-term retention of knowledge, taking regular breaks really helps. Try not to feel guilty about being out enjoying the sunshine instead of hunched over your textbooks. Remember Vitamin D is important for a healthy brain.

12. Practice old exams

One of the most effective ways to prepare for exams is to practice taking past versions. This helps you get used to the format of the questions, and - if you time yourself - can also be good practice for making sure you spend the right amount of time on each section.

13. Eat and drink right

You may feel like you deserve a treat or, that you don't have time to cook, but what you eat can really have an impact on energy levels and focus, so keep away from junk food. Keep your body and brain well-fuelled by choosing nutritious foods that have been proven to aid concentration and memory, such as fish, nuts, seeds, yogurt and blueberries. The same applies on exam day - eat a good meal before the test, based on foods that will provide a slow release of energy throughout. Sugar may seem appealing, but your energy levels will crash an hour later.

Remember that being well hydrated is essential for your brain to work at its best. Make sure you keep drinking plenty of water throughout your revision, and also on the exam day.

14. Plan your exam day

Make sure you get everything ready well in advance of the exam - don't leave it to the day before to suddenly remember you have lost your student ID and needed to get it replaced. Check all the rules and requirements and remember to pack pens, pencils and your calculator etc.

Get a good night's sleep the night before the exam. Sleeping well will give you the concentration and brain power you need to be at your best during the exam. Being relaxed and clear headed is more effective than being exhausted and bleary eyed

Have a healthy breakfast. Eat something that will fill you up and not leave you feeling hungry halfway through your exam. Don't eat anything that may upset your stomach.

Plan your route and journey time. Arrive early - work out how long it will take to get there - then add on some extra time for traffic or train delays. You really don't want to arrive having had to run halfway or feeling frazzled from being late. Get there early and be relaxed. You could also make plans to travel to the exam with friends or classmates, as long as you know they're likely to be punctual.

Good luck!