

# Preparing For and Taking Exams

*Exams show a professor how much you've learned. Find out as much as you can about the exam, study and review the material over a period of time (use the night before as a final review rather than a cram session), pace yourself during the exam, and always go over your graded exam with your professor. Preparing for exams will give you a better understanding of the material, lower your anxiety, and improve your scores*

## Preparing For Any Exam

- » Find out exactly what will be covered and what kinds of questions will be asked.
- » Begin your review preparation several days/weeks in advance.
- » Organize your review so that you will have time to study everything:
  - text chapters, lecture notes, previous exams, quizzes, and assignments
  - teacher handouts, summary outlines, lists of terms, sample problems, charts and graphs, or explanations of difficult concepts.
- » Prepare and answer a sample test on your own or with a study group or tutor.
- » Reserve time the night before the exam for a last, once-through review.

## Preparing For An Objective Exam

(Multiple Choice,  
True/False, etc.)

- » Learn the overall structure of the content even though this exam may emphasize details. Knowing the theme and main ideas provides a necessary framework.
- » Review text notes and lecture notes; turn headings/main points into questions.
- » Define all terms and any general vocabulary of the subject.
- » Work problems by actually doing them—don't just look over samples.
- » Know important proofs, diagrams, formulas, cycles, etc.
- » Review specific information with a study card system:
  - write a question on the front of a 3 x 5 card
  - write the answer on the back of the card
  - read the questions and try to answer them without looking at the back
  - carry cards with you and review often—while waiting for an appointment, etc.
  - shuffle the cards often to change their order.

## Preparing For An Essay Exam

- » Remember that essay exams involve retrieving information from your memory, organizing it, and expressing it in your own words in writing.
- » Look for trends and themes in your readings: use text boldface headings, end-of-chapter discussion questions, lecture notes, and your text and notes annotations.
- » Concentrate on information that unifies or brings together all the assigned material. This information will probably come from clues your instructor has been giving all semester—his/her approach, focus, and emphasis.
- » Spend most of your study time organizing and restating ideas in your own words rather than simply rereading information.
- » Form sample questions and write answers using your own words to clearly state the central theme, main points, and significant details.
- » Practice write a clearly-stated essay on every topic. When appropriate, include your own position on an issue and support it with logical evidence.
- » Give credit to reference and information sources.
- » Review complex or interrelated information with a study sheet system:
  - select information to be learned
  - outline it using as few words as possible; group together related points or ideas
  - read it over several times
  - write the first topic on a blank sheet of paper; try to fill in specifics from memory

- repeat this process for each topic.
- » Remember and use information on your study sheet by:
  - choosing a key word/phrase for each idea; memorizing each key word/phrase
  - writing the key words on the back of the exam before you begin your answer
  - using the key words as an outline for the major points you want to include.

**Use the strategies below to help you take exams more effectively.**

## **Taking Any Exam**

- » Take all materials, such as word book, dictionary, calculator, scratch paper.
- » Get there on time—do not arrive too early or too late. If you do arrive early, don't let your classmates' nervous anxiety rub off on you.
- » Sit in the front of the room but do not begin until you have heard all the instructions. If you do not understand the oral or the printed instructions, ask!
- » Before you start answering questions, skim the whole exam to get an overview.
- » Plan your time. Estimate how much time you should spend on each part of the exam. The number of points each section is worth should be your guide.
- » Pace yourself so you can complete all questions. Keep track of your time.
- » Read each question carefully.
- » Answer the easiest questions first.
- » Skip items you're not sure of and let other questions/answers spark your memory.
- » Stay calm and use logic and common sense to reason out answers.
- » Allow time at the end of the exam to read through your work, answer any questions you have left blank, and make clerical corrections.
- » Concentrate and avoid distractions. Do not be concerned about other students finishing the exam before you.
- » Know the exam grading formula: points per right answer, guess penalty.

## **Taking An Objective Exam**

- » Watch for absolute or categorical statements in true-false questions; they are usually false. Generalizations are usually only partially true.
- » Read the "stem" of multiple-choice questions and try to answer them for yourself before you look at the choices; then pick the answer closest to yours.
- » Read all the possible answers in multiple-choice questions even if you think the first or second choice is correct.
- » Eliminate alternatives in multiple-choice and matching questions, thus narrowing your choices and increasing the probability of a correct answer.
- » Guess at an answer (unless there is a guess penalty) rather than leave a blank—you might be right. If you have time, go back at the end and give it further thought.
- » Change an answer only if you can think of a concrete reason that makes your first answer wrong. When you "guess," your first answer is usually best.

## **Taking An Essay Exam**

- » Read the question and identify the topic(s) you are to write about, limiting words that restrict and direct your answer, and key words that tell you what type of information to include in your answer. For example:  
 Q: *Compare the causes of the Vietnam War with the causes of Desert Storm.*
  - topics: *Vietnam War and Desert Storm*
  - limiting word: *causes*
  - key word: *compare*
- » Note key word(s) and do exactly what is asked; for example, don't describe if the question asks you to evaluate. Frequently used key words include:
  - *describe, analyze, develop, trace* = descriptive and analysis questions
  - *explain, demonstrate, illustrate, justify* = explanation and proof questions
  - *compare, contrast, relate* = analogy and comparison questions
  - *criticize, evaluate, interpret, defend* = personal judgment questions
- » Organize your answer and jot a brief outline in the margin before you begin to write. This will help you write a more clear and concise answer.

- » Write your answers in complete sentences and include only one major point in each paragraph. The rest of each paragraph should explain or support the major point.
- » Be direct; do not ramble or list random pieces of information.
- » Outline major ideas for an answer if you run out of time to write a full answer.
- » Keep your paper legible. Instructors must easily read what you have to say.
- » Proof each answer, number all pages, and put your name and section on each sheet.