

Success Tip: Post Exam Review

How did your exams go? Did you do as well as you would have liked? Were you fully prepared for each test? What types of errors did you make? Answers to these questions may help you improve performance on future exams by focusing on effective exam preparation strategies. Post exam reviews can help to assess whether you missed exam questions due to:

Making careless mistakes

- Misread directions
- Read too much into questions
- Missed key words in the question or answer choices
- Forgot simple steps/rules
- Did not label work
- Did not show all work
- Did not draw diagrams as appropriate
- Did not check work for simple computational errors

Lack of preparation

- Did not understand concepts well enough to answer “application” questions
- Could not match terms with definitions
- Did not support answer with enough detail
- Confused by similar terms, processes
- Used incorrect procedures

Poor test taking techniques

- Ran out of time to finish test
- Could not recall relevant information
- Guessed the answers
- Changed answers at last minute
- Have difficult time with
 - Multiple Choice or True/False tests
 - Essay or short answer tests
 - Problem-based tests

Identify resources you can use to prepare for exams.

Were the questions on the exams from:

1. Lecture notes?
2. Textbook and associated readings?
3. Homework?
4. A combination of the above?

Now that you have an idea how professors test for each course, use the appropriate resources to prepare for exams: textbooks, reading notes, lecture notes, homework assignments, study guides, old exams, your classmates, course information that may be on first class, files that may be on reserve in the library, or online resources. You will need to adapt your preparation strategies from course to course and professor to professor each semester.

How are you preparing for exams?

Do you review thoroughly? Can you apply information to different situations? Or are you skimming the information, and just studying to the point of recognition but not application? Not all questions are recall questions. Most often you will have to apply a concept or procedure to new scenarios and examples. Make sure you understand course material and are able to apply it to any given situation.

Are you studying silently? Reading and answering questions in your head, is only using one mode of learning. It is also important to verbalize information. Talking about course material is a great way to review and test your knowledge, so ask classmates to form a study group. Predict test questions and quiz each other; explain concepts to each other. Writing down supporting information or working out problems on paper is another way to test your knowledge to see if you thoroughly understand concepts and can apply them.

When did you begin preparing?

Although it is tempting to wait until the night before an exam to begin studying, DON'T DO IT! Cramming six chapters of information into one evening of study time does not make for an effective study session. You will become frustrated very quickly, and probably won't retain much of the material. Give yourself plenty of time.

- Try to review and clarify your class notes on a daily basis. Students who do this have 80% retention of the material come exam time. If you wait until the night before the exam, you'll be lucky to recognize 20% of the material!

- For Math, Physics, Chemistry and other math-based courses, write in English, what is being done at each step of the problem solving process demonstrated in class. Just referring back to a “bunch of numbers and/or formulas” won’t mean much to you at a later date. But if you describe each step, in your own words, you will be able to understand and utilize your notes when reviewing important procedures for homework and exams.
- Break your reading down into 20 to 30 minute segments and read daily.
- Read actively. Preview the reading so that you will be able to ask questions as you read. Take notes or highlight important concepts.
- Compare the reading to lecture notes.
- Make flashcards on difficult terminology; concept maps for detailed processes; formula sheets for those used most often with definitions and examples of use.
- Start homework problems as soon as possible after class. Methods demonstrated in class will be easily remembered and reinforced.
- Test yourself on the related material frequently.
- Remember that it takes 5-7 times of working with concepts to actually learn them. This does not mean 5-7 hours of study, but 5-7 times that you work with and manipulate the material using a variety of methods to review and reinforce concepts. The greatest learning comes from actually making flash cards, charts, pictures, concept maps, etc. Learn by doing. The constant repetition and reinforcement of material on a daily basis eliminates the need for cramming prior to an exam.

Saying “I’ll study harder next time” may not help improve grades. What does “harder” mean? Just knowing which answers you should have marked will not be enough for the next test. Study smarter; study to learn, not to memorize.

- Identify if your difficulty stems from a study skill problem, a test taking technique problem, or a content-based problem.
- Isolate and identify specific study skill problems. Change those habits.
- Isolate and identify your most problematic test taking techniques. Correct them.
- Learn new strategies to focus on difficult content and review frequently.