

Revising for exams

How to effectively prepare and revise for exams

There's no secret to exam success - it's all in the preparation. But how do you prepare for exams? The following tips will help you organise your time and materials to ensure you're well prepared.

The essentials

Find out how you will be assessed. What kinds of exam will you be sitting – multiple choice, essay, open-book, take home? Different types of exams can require different forms of preparation.

Look at old exam papers. Find out what areas of the course or which topics have been examined in the past. Review the subject handbook and objectives to gain a sense of the main issues that have been covered and the types of knowledge you will be expected to demonstrate. As you review your notes try to recall how the material has been examined in the past. At the end of each unit of work it is also useful to ask: *how might this be tested in the exam?*

Be clear about:

- How many exams you will have and what each is worth as a percentage of your final grade.
- Whether there will be a choice of tasks or a range of questions in the exams.
- Whether the department is running exam information sessions.
- Where to find old exam papers or model answers.

Set goals and prepare early

How well do you want to do in this subject? How much time and effort are you prepared to put into achieving your target?

Ideally, you prepare for exams throughout the semester by attending **all** your classes and revising work weekly, if not daily. Serious, final exam study should begin about four weeks before the exam date. But, don't panic if you haven't started yet – it's not too late!

Find a space just for study:

Take time to think about where you work most productively and plan to do your exam revision there. Do you work better at home alone in your room or at the library surrounded by others? Remove distractions from the area: Internet, mobile phone, magazines, any non-study related material that may tempt you away from your work.

Organise your subject material:

Make sure you have the subject guide and objectives,

any information about the exam and a complete set of lecture and prac/lab notes for your subject. Check that you have all the handouts distributed in classes. Organise your notes sequentially in a ring binder or in computer files so that they reflect the topics in the course outline. Information should also be well indexed, summarised and easily accessible for revision purposes.

Prioritise your subjects:

Which subjects do you want to do your best in? Which subjects do you find most difficult? You may want to spend more time on your weaker subjects so that you achieve a certain average grade. Or you may want to aim for an H1 in a particular subject even if it means aiming only at a Pass in another.

Prioritise the topics within a subject:

Using your subject outlines, identify which topics will be examined. Find out whether you have to answer questions on all areas or whether you can limit the range of topics you need to prepare. The aim is to identify what **MUST** be studied, what **SHOULD** be studied and what (if anything) can be ignored.

Make a revision timetable:

Plan how you will use the time leading up to your exam. It's better to plan frequent short revision sessions – around 50 minutes – as longer sessions are less effective for recall. Allocate 2 to 3 hours for revision each day and you'll be amazed how much you can cover in a week.

Revision in action

Once you have worked out which topics you will answer questions on in an exam it's time to start revising. Note that revising means *looking at again* – not learning something for the first time. If you've been working effectively throughout the semester, revision should be a process of reminding yourself about the important points and consolidating your understanding of a topic.

If you are looking at material for the first time during exam revision you will need to give yourself extra time to understand the topic and grasp the new concepts.

What to revise

When revising, ask yourself two questions:

- *How can I improve my knowledge and understanding*

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of the topic?

- How can I improve my ability to demonstrate my knowledge in the exam?

Best results will be achieved if you aim to refine **both** your subject knowledge and your exam performance capabilities. It is unproductive, for example, to continually extend your subject knowledge if you have difficulty applying information to solving problems or expressing your understanding in essay form.

Revision sessions should thus involve:

1. Identifying what you already know and understand, what you need to know, and how you can find out and/or remember additional information.
2. Preparing to demonstrate in the exam that you understand what you have learned – for example, that you can apply principles or theories to new material and situations.

Make sure you allow time in your revision timetable for both kinds of work.

Improving subject knowledge for exams

Do something active when reading over your notes:

Your understanding and recall of information will increase if you engage actively with the material. Try to:

- Make **summaries** in your own words
- Draw a **mind map** or diagram of information you have in text form
- Draft some **questions** to test knowledge of the material you have just studied
- **Cover sections** of a list or formula and see if you can supply the missing information
- **Explain** the topic to a friend – if you can clearly express the concepts in your own words, you can be sure you understand the topic well
- **Imagine** a situation from a **different point of view** – for example, the client's, the patient's, the plaintiff's – or imagine pictures, figures and physical structures from another perspective
- **Annotate your notes** as you read and develop a list of key terms and concepts

Learn general rules and principles rather than masses of unrelated facts:

Generally, it's better to know fewer topics in some depth than to try to remember isolated bits of information from across the subject. That is, it is easier to recall information that is connected and logically organised.

Additionally, many exams test whether you can apply the rules or principles you have learned to new areas, so it is less likely that you will be asked to replicate or regurgitate examples you worked on during classes.

Match your learning strategy to the type of material:

Learning by rote is good for remembering lists, items in order, formulae and vocabulary. To learn by rote try repetition, rhymes, melodies and peg words.

Mnemonics are also useful and you can make up your own to suit the material. For example:

- **Every Good Boy Deserves Fruit** (for the notes of the treble stave)
- **My Very Elderly Mother Just Saw Uncle Ned's Parrot** (for the planets in order from the sun)

Different strategies are needed, however, to remember concepts and theories, argumentative material and systems. Understanding the big picture, familiarising yourself with any specialised vocabulary and explaining the ideas and processes to others will develop your understanding and recall of this type of material.

Make revision a meaningful task:

Ultimately, you will remember more of the information you revise if you can make it *meaningful to yourself* in some way. Give it purpose by thinking about where and how you will apply the information; or make it personally relevant by thinking about whether and how the concepts apply to you.

Demonstrating your learning

Attempt old exam papers:

Familiarise yourself with the structure and format of old exam papers in your subjects. Write answers to the questions and then check them against your notes to see if you have omitted any important points.

Check the Uni Melb library website which has archived copies of old exam papers at

http://library.unimelb.edu.au/examination_papers

Write detailed answers within the time limit to the questions on a previous exam paper, and reflect:

- Do I need to work faster in order to complete the paper or slow down and include more detail?
- Would my answers earn the allotted number of marks? E.g. if 5 marks are allocated to a question, a single word answer is not likely to be sufficient.

Put extra time into practising the exam tasks you least prefer:

Some people like writing essays and dislike problem solving; some people excel at multiple choice and do poorly when asked to write extended responses. It is important that you identify and improve your performance in **all** exam tasks you will need to do.

Finally...

If you need help preparing for exams, seek it as early as possible, whether it is from your tutors, lecturers, Academic Skills Advisers or student support services.

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