POLISHING YOUR PAPER

Preparing for exams is a process that includes a number of academic skills. Effective note-taking, time management and critical thinking are all essential to exam success, and the most successful students use these skills deliberately. On the other hand, there are several mistakes that often lead to lower-than-desired exam grades: the main two are starting too late and memorization.

START EARLY
Believe it or not, exam preparation begins on day one of the semester. Attending class, taking effective notes, completing required readings and thinking about material are all ways we prepare for exams. Studying means more than memorization: it also involves learning and training our brains to think.

Compare writing final exams to running a marathon: when a marathon is in your future, you’ll start training well in advance. You will get in shape, build endurance and increase your confidence as you approach the big race. The same principles apply to studying for exams. As you progress through the semester, you will build knowledge, train your brain and increase your understanding by reading, thinking and discussing. Doing so will help you find connections between ideas, think critically about content and quickly remember and retrieve information, all while reducing stress at the busy exam time. Early preparation involves taking good notes, budgeting your time and making use of all available resources.

BE PREPARED
Avoid last-minute cramming by preparing your required study material during the semester. Most students use notes from lectures and readings to prepare for exams; rather than wait until the last minute, why not prepare them right away?

First, take effective lecture notes. Translate content and ideas into your own words, and use different note-taking systems—such as the Cornell method or mind-mapping templates—to organize your ideas. Using a comparison chart throughout the semester will also help to make sense of closely-related theories or ideas and will save time from trying to understand them later. Also, think of potential exam questions as they come up: what does the professor emphasize or repeat? What theories or ideas could be compared or contrasted? What different themes have emerged? Keep track of these questions, and make sure you can answer them.

After each lecture, review your notes, adding any missing details or necessary clarification. Then take time every week to look over past notes; doing so will help build meaningful connections and will also prevent you from having to relearn everything at exam time.

BUDGETING YOUR TIME
Combine calendars and goal-setting to make the most of your study time. First, when are exams? What is your realistic goal for each exam? Now, how are you going to get there? Use long-term calendars (monthly or four-month) to plan ahead. Break up the content so you’re working on a bit at a time, and...
create checkpoints so you know you’re on track. Creating these short-term goals for your learning will keep your study time organized, preventing those stressful last-minute cram sessions later.

It’s easy to plan ahead, but how do you actually reach those goals? Try creating a weekly schedule. For many students, scheduling time to read and study will make them feel more accountable and therefore motivated. Where are the gaps in your schedule? At what time of day do you learn best? Plan your study time with your personal preferences in mind, and then be specific about what you will study, as well as where and how. What can you realistically achieve during those study times? Taking on too much will be overwhelming and will ultimately be demotivating. Finally, make sure your friends and family know what you’re up to; they’ll be less likely to interrupt if they know your plans.

Make the most of the time available. Start with the most important courses and material; what is worth the most marks? What don’t you understand? Study the difficult material so you have time to understand it; after all, why waste time on what you already know? If your textbook is unclear or hard to understand, you might find it helpful to look up definitions elsewhere.

**EXPECTATIONS**
Knowing what to expect is the first step to exam preparation. How will you know how to study if you don’t know what the exam will look like? There are a few questions to keep in mind when preparing for exams:

- Where, when and how long is the exam? Knowing these details will calm nerves and reduce anxiety before the exam by giving a feeling of control.
- What materials are you required to bring? Are you allowed any ‘cheat sheets’ or notes?
- What format is the exam? What types of questions will you need to answer? Will there be multiple choice, short answer, essay or other types of questions?
- What topics will be covered? Will any particular content be stressed?
- Will test material come from lectures, readings, labs or other places?
- Are old exams available for you to practice on?
- What percentage of your final grade is the exam?

**STUDY STRATEGIES**
What is the best way to study? This is the question most students ask, but the truth is there is no ‘best way’. Every student is different, and depending on your learning style, your background, your courses and your goals, your strategies will likely be very different from those of your friends. That said, there are a few considerations to keep in mind as you are studying for your exams:

**ENVIRONMENT**
Where you study has a strong effect on the quality of your learning. It will be hard to concentrate if you’re distracted by noise, comfort or other aspects of the environment. When choosing a study space, think about these elements:

- Distractions: A good study space will be free of distractions, including noise, movement, people and electronics.
- Lighting: Lighting should be bright enough to keep you alert and avoid eye strain.
Temperature: You should feel comfortable, with temperatures staying slightly cool. Feeling too warm or too cold will hurt your concentration, while being slightly cool will keep you awake.

Seating: Sit in a chair that is both comfortable and firm. Try to avoid studying on your bed or on any surface that might put you to sleep.

Tools: Before you start studying, make sure you have all the tools you need. Constantly stopping to get something you need will interrupt your thought patterns and prevent you from learning.

TOOLS
Make sure you have everything you need before you start.
• Notes, from both lectures and readings
• Books, including textbooks, articles and other resources
• Stationery, including paper, pens, markers and anything else you need
• Calculator and other required tools
• Water and snacks
• Comfortable clothing: it’s usually a good idea to dress in layers to maintain a comfortable temperature while studying

ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT
The most common mistake students make when studying is taking a shallow approach to learning material, such as passively reading or memorizing information. While some memorization is necessary (e.g., dates, names, equations, etc.) true understanding comes from making information meaningful and thinking more critically about it. You need to be able to work with material: solve problems, compare and contrast ideas, analyse data and evaluate arguments. You can do this by asking questions, seeking answers and being creative.

Ask questions while you’re studying. While there are dozens of examples and different levels of questions you can ask, you can start with questions like these:
• What might I be asked to do with this information?
• Why is this important?
• How or why did this occur?
• What is the best solution to this problem?
• Can I explain the differences between this idea and another?
• How is this information related to what I already know?
• How do I feel about this argument or theory? Why?

Staying actively engaged can be a challenge, especially when studying material you’re not completely interested in. This is a natural and expected part of learning. You might find your mind wandering or becoming easily distracted, or perhaps you’ve read the same paragraph several times without remembering a thing. If this sounds familiar, you can help prevent time-wasting by using some simple strategies:
• Study in small bursts—no all-nighters!
• Take frequent (timed) breaks to stay alert
• Change activities and study techniques often
• Process material in small chunks
• Recite content out loud, using your own words

KEY CONCEPTS
Success on exams requires a strong understanding of the key concepts of the course. But how do you know what the key concepts are? They’re sometimes obvious and instinctual, coming from background knowledge, repetition and basic understanding. Other times, however, you need to use critical thinking and reading strategies to determine the important content.

• Check the syllabus: what are the learning objectives for the course? What are the weekly themes?
• Look in the textbook: headings and subheadings will show the important topics, and you should pay close attention to any text that is bold, italicized or otherwise set apart.
• In lectures, what does the professor emphasize? What information is repeated or stressed? For what concepts are several different examples given?
• Think about closely-related or opposing terms and ideas. Be aware of differences and exceptions to different theories, as you will likely be tested on this information.
• How does thinking occur in your discipline? Every discipline will approach information differently. For example, scientists will analyse systems and their parts, historians will look at cause and effect, and geographers will use models to interpret the world. How your discipline thinks about information will change how you determine key concepts.

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT
Like any skill, writing exams gets easier with practice. By solving sample problems, preparing essay answers and reviewing past exams you will fix your weaknesses, find your strengths and increase your confidence.

Be sure to complete any practice questions in your textbook. If you get the answer right, move on; if you don’t, however, find out where you went wrong and try it again.

Answer sample essay questions as well. To study, create outlines and mind maps to organize your arguments and incorporate examples and references whenever necessary. Then go a step further and practice writing the actual essay. Replicate the exam conditions by handwriting your essay, not using any notes and creating a time limit. This strategy will make you feel more prepared for the actual exam, increasing memory and comprehension while reducing anxiety.

Many students aren’t aware that past exams are often available in the library and are a useful tool for exam preparation. You will get an idea of the important content, the format of the exam and the types of questions you will be asked. Be careful, however, to not rely on these exams only; they should be used to complement your other study strategies.
HEALTH AND WELLNESS
Rest, diet and exercise are all important for proper brain function. Don’t forget to eat proper meals, get plenty of sleep and exercise regularly—and have fun! You also need time to laugh and relax, both of which will help you reenergize, reduce stress and process information.

CRAMMING SUCCESSFULLY
At one time or another, almost all students will be forced to cram. Cramming should be nothing more than a last resort, certainly not a regular or planned event. When it does happen, though, do it effectively.

- Become a good predictor of questions. Identify the main ideas and create short answer questions for each. You can use these questions to test yourself and hang information on.
- Restrict your learning to what can be managed effectively. Don’t try to learn everything; focus on the main ideas and the most important content. After all, you want to know the answers to the major exam questions, not the questions that aren’t worth much.
- Try to summarize the main ideas in your own words. Doing this shows an understanding of the content and will make the information more meaningful and easy to retrieve later.
- Use past exams if possible. While exam questions will most likely change from year to year, past exams will give you an idea of the main points and important content on which you will be tested. Use these questions to guide your studying; answer them thoroughly to gain knowledge of at least some of the exam content.
- Find definitions and clear explanations of concepts online. This might be more efficient than searching through a textbook and struggling to understand the content.

BEFORE THE EXAM
The night before the exam, stay relaxed. Calmly review your notes, have all your supplies ready and double-check the exam time and location. Visualize success and remember to get a good night’s sleep.

Plan to arrive on time without being too early. Try to avoid cramming right before the exam, as doing so might just confuse you. It’s also a good idea to stay away from classmates who are anxious or nervous: their stress could rub off on you. Stay positive and remember: you can do this!

REFERENCES
