

Studying for Exams

Some Basic Guidelines



Studying efficiently requires organisation of time and resources. The following points are a general set of guidelines to help you prepare for exams.

Begin studying early

Ideally you should begin studying about four weeks before your exams.

Organise your time

You can pick up a weekly study planner from The Learning Centre and use it to organise your time. Cross out the times when you can't study because of other commitments (e.g. lectures or work). Then plan 1 hour time slots you will use for study.

Find out the kinds of exams you will be sitting

Different types of exams will require different approaches. Here are some tips:

Essay Exams

If you are sitting an exam that requires answers in essay form, find out how many questions you have to answer. For example, if you must answer four questions, select and study four topics in detail plus one extra as a backup topic.

Multiple Choice/Short Answer Exams

Multiple Choice exams will usually only cover what has been discussed in the lectures and tutorials. Use the course outline as a framework for study. Look for the main ideas and concepts and then find details to support them.

Use flash cards to help you memorise the information. On small cards, write down definitions, main ideas and details. You can carry them around with you and use them to drill yourself.

Open Book Exams

One of the biggest myths about Open Book exams is that you don't need to study for them. While Open Book exam questions 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.

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 notes.

Work out your optimum study time

Work out when you study most effectively. Are you more alert in the morning or evening? Schedule study times that suit your personal rhythms.

Organise your subject material

Make sure you have a complete set of lecture and tutorial notes for each course. Gather together all notes and make sure they correspond to the topics in your course outline.

If you've missed any lectures, see if they are taped, or borrow copies of the notes from another student. Check that you have copies of any extra readings or handouts given out in classes. Once you have organised all your material, you can study by topic.

Prioritise the hardest subjects

You will need to spend more time studying the subjects you find most difficult. Schedule these first.

Make a study area

- Choose a quiet place for study where you won't be easily distracted. Make yourself comfortable.
- Always study in the same place.
- Make sure you have good lighting to read by.
- Don't try to study the entire course in one sitting. Divide the subject up into topics you need to revise.

Set study periods

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.

Set study goals

Set yourself a goal for each study session. This will help you keep track of what you are learning. Write them down as soon as you begin your study session, or set them at the end of the study session for next time.

Some examples could be:

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 1-3

Revising to remember: use the SQ3R method of study

Survey:

Before you begin to study, survey the material to remind yourself what it is about. Skim through lecture notes to get a picture of the main ideas. If studying from a book, look at tables of contents, possible chapter summaries, graphs and tables.

Question:

Your reading is more active and memorable if you look for specific answers to questions. If there are headings in the material turn the heading into a question. For example, if the heading is Organisational Theory, your questions might be: "What is organisational theory and where did it start?"

Read:

Read through the material once, without making notes. On your second reading, make notes of the main ideas.

Review past exam papers

Past exam papers for many subjects can often be found in the UNSW Library, but first check with your tutor. If previous exam papers are available, work through them. Look at how they fit into the course. Look at the wording of the questions and familiarise yourself with the clue words (pick up a copy of 'Exam Skills - Clue Words' from The Learning Centre). Practice doing the papers under exam conditions and carefully review your answers.

Form a study group

Form a study group with other students. Swap practice exams and give feedback. Drill each other on study topics.

Recall:

With the book shut, try to recall what you have read. Make notes of what you remember and check their accuracy against your study material.

Review:

Review all your notes at the end of the study period. This is an important part of the study process because it can really help you remember what you have studied. You can also try summarising your notes down to key words that will act as memory triggers for related ideas. Set review times separately from your study times. Read through your review notes, cover them and then try reciting them back.

Further Readings

Barnett, K. 1978, *How to Study*, Sun Books, Melbourne.

Burdess, N. 1991, *The Handbook of Student Skills*, Prentice Hall, New York.

Freedman, R. 1991, *Mastering Study Skills*, Macmillan, London, 1991.

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