

Preparing for tests

As a student, you may find that tests cause a great deal of stress. However, tests provide you with the incentive to learn information for the first time and allow you to deepen your understanding of the material you already know. Tests are like a challenge best faced by preparing yourself to meet them head on. This preparation should include these steps:

- find out about the test
 - organize study materials and schedule study time
 - anticipate test questions
 - work with the material
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Find out about the test

In order to study effectively, ask several questions:

- **what material will the test cover?**
Sometimes instructors test only certain sections of the course. You don't want to waste time studying for material that will not be on the test.
- **will the questions mainly come from the text, lectures or both?**
Ask your instructors for the origin of most of the test questions. You can also refer to past tests or ask students who have previously taken the course from the same instructor.
- **what is important?**
You can ask your instructors about what is really important in the course. Although some instructors may respond that everything is important, others may reveal some of the topics they think are essential.
- **what percentage of the final grade is it worth?**
Knowing how much the test counts toward the final grade helps you determine how much time you need to spend studying for the test and to make decisions about how to manage other academic demands.
- **what types of questions will be on the test?**
On a test you may be required to define terms, label diagrams, solve problems, analyze information, criticize a concept, apply theory to real life situations or compare/contrast ideas. Knowing the type of questions asked on the test enables you to focus your studying accordingly. Ask your instructor for sample test questions, refer to past tests or ask students who have taken the course before from the same instructor.

Organize study materials and schedule study time

The next thing you need to do to prepare for a test is organize your course materials and plan study time.

Organize materials

Collect your class notes, textbook notes, assignments, past quizzes, lab notes, etc., ensuring nothing is missing. Then put all related material together — for example, all your information on Child Abuse from various sources. Then divide the large volume of material into smaller, more manageable study packages. For example, you may break it down by chapter, by week or by class.

Anticipate time demands

You need to anticipate what you have to do around test time so there are no unpleasant surprises. For instance, you may have assignments due or other tests. You may have to prioritize these demands and decide what you can realistically accomplish within the available time.

Plan study sessions

When you are scheduling study sessions, keep in mind that you need to

- schedule many short blocks of study time rather than a few long blocks, as you will learn and retain far more, and
- set aside time the night before the test to do one final review. Studying the night before the test enhances retention of information.

Anticipate test questions

When preparing to meet the challenge of a test, anticipating test questions is an excellent strategy. To anticipate potential questions, you could:

- refer to past tests in the course
- turn learning objectives into questions
- check your textbook for study questions, problems, or case studies
- use the text study guide, if there is one
- create questions for each topic by asking:
 - who, what, when, where, why and how
 - what does X mean?
 - what is the definition of X?
 - how can X be described?
 - what is an example of X?
 - what are the major parts or types of X?
 - what are the major steps in X?
 - what is the function of X?
 - what are the causes of X?
 - what are the effects or consequences of X?

- how does X compare with Y?
- what case can be made for or against X?
- what are the advantages and disadvantages of X?

Work with the material

Once you have a list of potential test questions, work actively with the material. Simply rereading your notes and the text is not effective. Actively working with the material involves writing or drawing, discussing, practicing and using memory techniques. These activities use your auditory, visual and kinesthetic senses, and the more senses you use when you study, the more active you are, and the more likely you are to learn the material.

Create study charts

Study charts are one way of organizing and summarizing information. They are particularly effective for studying for essay tests, since they illustrate how ideas are interrelated. To prepare a study chart, select the ideas you want to see as interrelated. Then outline the specific information for each topic, using as few words as possible. Group important points, facts and ideas that relate to each topic.

Draw maps

A map organizes and summarizes information in a text or lecture. They are most useful for studying interrelated material, since you learn the overall whole rather than separate facts. To draw a map, put the major topic or concept in the middle of the page, using key words. From the middle, draw lines or branches from the key word. On each branch indicate a subtopic. From each subtopic, there may be branches leading to subpoints of the subtopic.

Make diagrams or models

Some information can be learned most easily by drawing a diagram or model.

Discuss the information

When you discuss information, you use your auditory and kinesthetic senses. When you can explain a concept to another person, it demonstrates your understanding and enhances your learning of the information. Study groups are very useful for discussion of information. Group members explain and listen to explanations from each other.

Use memory techniques

You have likely been in the situation of being unable to recall information in a test situation even though you know you know the information. Using memory techniques when you study can enhance the likelihood of recalling information on a test.

Recitation

Recitation means saying aloud ideas that you want to remember. This is an effective way to strengthen information in memory because it relies on your visual, auditory and kinesthetic senses. Read a section of your notes and then hide the information and try to recite what you have just read. Look back to check your accuracy and repeat if necessary. If you cannot correctly recite information immediately after reading it, it's unlikely that you will be able to recall the information in several hours or days.

Cue cards

Cue cards are one way to study effectively for courses with lots of detail, such as definitions, formulas and dates. On 3" x 5" cue cards, write key terms on one side and supporting information on the other. For example, you could write the term psychoanalysis on one side and its definition on the other. These cards are easy to carry with you so you can study them whenever you have a few minutes.

Key word technique

The key word technique is very useful for remembering definitions, the meaning of abstract words and words from foreign languages. This involves two steps— first, think of something the word reminds you of. Next, try to work the meaning of the word into the picture you have of the word. For example, the word "ostracize" means to socially exclude — you can imagine an ostrich standing alone, with a group of other ostriches standing nearby, talking amongst themselves, ignoring the lone ostrich.

Rhymes

When you review information, try to make up rhymes. Many students recall this old rhyme for helping them remember when Christopher Columbus discovered North America: "Columbus sailed the ocean blue in fourteen hundred and ninety two."

Acronyms

Look for acronyms in your material. Acronyms are code words where each of the letters stands for the first letter of the items that you want to remember. An example of an acronym for remembering the colours in the spectrum is ROY G. BIV, which stands for red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet.

Acrostics

Acrostics are like acronyms, except they are code sentences instead of code words. The first letter of each of the words in the code sentence stands for the first letter of each of the words you want to remember. The following is an example of an acrostic for the colours in the spectrum: Richard Of York Gave Battle In Vain.

Test yourself

For most courses, it is helpful for you to practice answering potential test questions. You could:

- get members of your study groups to test each other on the test questions you previously brainstormed
- practice making outlines or maps from memory for possible essay test questions
- practice drawing and labeling diagrams, charts, figures, etc.
- practice taking old tests under timed conditions
- practice solving problems or working with case studies