

# Doing Well at School

## Tips for Studying, Note Taking, Preparing for and Writing Exams

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### Part 1

#### Attitudes and Mental Preparation

1. Having a positive attitude about yourself, your abilities and your intellect is essential to doing well in school generally. Getting down on yourself, especially if you haven't performed well on an exam, is not going to lead to academic improvement.
2. Having a positive attitude about school will make you more enthusiastic and energetic. This includes having a upbeat outlook on your professors, your class mates, and the courses themselves. This doesn't mean that everything will be rosy, but you can be certain that if you get down on a course or a professor that you won't do as well in that course as you are capable of doing.
3. Develop strategies for:
  - a. Recognizing when you are in trouble or heading that way
  - b. Solving the problems you identifyLearn when to apply these strategies, and do so immediately.
4. Recognize and take positive action on these common problems:
  - a. Procrastination—are you always putting things off to the last minute?
  - b. Time management--is there never enough time to do the things you want to do?
  - c. Disorganization-- is your room and your desk a mess? Are your notes and computer files in chaos? Are you always looking for things?
  - d. Boredom and fatigue--are you always overtired and/or bored in your classes?
  - e. Are you routinely missing classes?
  - f. Are you always behind in readings?
  - g. Do you frequently feel that you never quite know what's going on?
  - h. Do you find that your notes don't make sense?
5. Give yourself permission to have fun. School should not be all work and no play. Take time off to socialize, party, be with friends, go to movies, and so on. Turning school into a job is one sure way to develop a negative attitude toward it. We learn in many ways, and often where you least expect it. Find a healthy balance between work and play. Rewarding yourself with "time off" is often a good incentive to accomplish concrete school work goals.
6. Do school work with others *some of the time*. We can often learn a lot by sharing ideas, perspectives, questions and problems with others. But keep collective learning focussed and goal oriented. It is very easy for groups to digress into social chatter and before you know it, you have spent a couple of hours and done very little.
7. Balance collective work with personal study time. Your own learning will benefit from regular dedicated study and reading times in personally comfortable environments. Avoid distractions. Try, if possible, to work alone or in situations where you are not tempted by the presence of others. Take breaks as you need them, and certainly not less than hourly. You will retain more if you get up, have a stretch for five minutes, and then return to your reading or writing. This is especially important if you are working on a computer where it is easy to get "hypnotized" by the computer monitor.

## Part 2

### Learning from Lectures

1. Come to class with readings done, even if you don't fully comprehend the material. What you have read but not understood will be more readily understood because you have read the material. You will get moments of recognition, connections will be made, things will fall into place. You will be able to ask questions more knowledgeably, and you will retain the material better. Re-read material that you did not understand the first time after the lecture which has covered that material and see if it makes more sense this time.
2. Try to do as much learning in class as possible. Come prepared to be engaged. Even if you don't care for the material, you'll do better by trying to understand why it is considered important. Things *not* to do:
  - a. the crossword puzzle
  - b. read the Gazette
  - c. chatter with friends
  - d. make plans for tonight
  - e. pretend you are a zombie
  - f. catch up on your sleep

Not only are these rude, but they create the impression that you don't care. When it comes time to hand out participation marks, these behaviours will be remembered.

4. Listen, really listen, to what is being said. Play an active role in class. Ask questions and participate in a way that is central to the material. (Simply saying things is not the same.) It is better to listen more intently in class and take fewer notes than try to capture every word being said.
5. Review your notes from the previous class especially if the topic is still being discussed. Try to build your notes within the "argument framework" mentioned below. Within 24 hours of class (the sooner the better), take 15-20 minutes to "fill in" ideas that were discussed in class. Review the material before the next class.
6. Create a one paragraph summary of every lecture within a few days of the class. Put in your personal thoughts on it, and any questions you might have. Anticipate questions that might be asked.

### Remembering Things for Long Term

The key to remembering is to make *associations*--that is, you encode information in a variety of ways. There are 2 kinds of remembering:

*rote memory* (simply memorizing without understanding)

*flexible memory* (understanding and applying the material)

Obviously, you want to develop your flexible memory to the greatest degree possible. Strategies for doing so include:

1. Generating your own examples
2. Using visual images
3. Making associations within and between courses
4. Create mnemonics
5. Recite the key ideas under each heading
6. Predict questions
7. Find ways to apply your knowledge

## Part 3

### One Note-Taking Strategy

<p><i>Div pap into 1/3 2/3</i></p> <p><i>Mk brf notes only on left</i></p> <p><i>Use slt hand techs, lts of abbrev so I can listen and follow lect better</i></p> <p><i>What are key points?</i></p> <p><i>Get down headings, listen for key words, look for central organizing idea.</i></p> <p><i>Don't try to get down every word—focus on underlying arg</i></p> <p><i>Within 8 hrs, fill out notes on rt side</i></p> <p><i>If I still have qsts, discuss it with another student, or prof at begin of next class</i></p>	<p>Draw a line about one third of the way over down the left side of the page. This is where you would take your actual notes in class. Try to use as many abbreviations as possible so that you are writing the least amount possible. Focus on the key points, key words, concepts that you will need to know. Because you are listening more, you are much more likely to understand and retain the main ideas. Trust your memory, and learn to rely on the key points you have written down in class.</p> <p>Leave the right side of the page blank for now. As soon as possible after class, go back to your notes, and then fill in the right hand side with more extended notes that are triggered by the key words. You will be surprised by how much you remember, and how much clearer and more organized your notes will be.</p> <p>The following page provides an example of this page's side bar notes fully filled out.</p>
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Prof noted that standard note taking techniques usually involve the student getting little more than 20% of the ideas and information contained in lecture because its difficult to write and listen at the same time. By limiting note taking to key ideas and words on the left hand column, and really listening instead, my total recall and comprehension of material will rise significantly.

The key is to use short hand techniques, and abbreviations which I understand. If there are overheads, use these to guide my notes.

Try not to get bogged down in unnecessary material, or background colour commentating. The important material, the central ideas, will usually be repeated.

The key, however, is that I **MUST** fill out this side of the page within about 8 hours. This is when my recall will be at its sharpest provided I have been really listening. If I let this part of the plan slide, all I will have is a bunch of sketchy, nearly worthless notes.

The prof also argues that the more that one gets involved in the class, but asking questions, making comments, and so on, the more I will actually process, remember and understand the information, as opposed to simply memorizing it.

Key Concepts: Listen, connect, rather than scramble making notes

Develop these notes systematically

My goals: Attend every class, do readings ahead, keep on top of it

Participate at least once every class

Try this new note taking system

## Part 4

### Preparing for Exams

1. Be informed and psychologically prepared for an exam. Know where it is, when it is, type of exam, and so on.
2. Established a good environment for study. Decide where to work, and avoid distractions. Work as much time alone as you do with friends.
3. Set targets. Eg. Review two classes or topics a day for the five days before an exam, and then review key headings before the exam.
4. Identify topics that need special attention, and make sure you sort these out before the exam.
5. Pull together your headings for each topic, learn these headings (or themes), and summarize the important details that go with each heading.
6. Close your books, and try to write down the testable details from memory. But as always, try to link that material to the “big picture.”
7. Develop your mnemonics and other remembering strategies.
8. Don't stay up all night. You will always do better on an exam, especially a multiple choice exam, if you are well rested.
9. Relax. Keep it all in perspective. No one exam is going to ruin your life or your career. It's merely a hurdle which you have to jump, and you are more than capable of doing so.

## Part 5

### Writing Multiple Choice Exams

#### Common Problems:

1. **Anxiety.** You may wish to come to the exam a minute or two after others have arrived if the pre-exam crowd makes you anxious. Do not attempt to do a five minute review of all of the material just before you go into an exam. This is a recipe for creating confusion.
2. **Lack of perspective.** Exams are important, as all evaluations are, but it is not the end of the earth if you do not do as well as you would like. Most courses provide you several components of evaluation, and you have the opportunity to do better next time. Remember that in an exam work 20% of your final mark, the difference between a 60 and an 80 is just 4 points of your final grade.
3. **Lack of self confidence.** The best antidote to this is to go into the exam as well prepared as you can.
4. **Over-thinking or over reading a question.** Try to answer the question that is being asked. Don't make assumptions about what is behind the question, as this could lead you to the wrong answer. There should be sufficient information in the stem of the question to arrive at the correct answer.
5. **Assuming that there must be a "trick" to the question.** While it is true that there are distractors (wrong answers) which you might choose, there is also one correct answer that is better than any of the distractors. Your professor is not trying to trick you so much as trying to evaluate whether you can choose the correct answer. The underlying premise is that those who know and understand the material will more often choose the correct answer over any of the distractors.
6. **Worrying about the patterns created by your answers** (7 D's in a row, for example). Remember, you are creating this pattern, and it may well be that not all of the correct answers are actually D's.
7. **Speeding through the exam.** Most exams allow you more than enough time consider each of the questions. There are no extra marks for finishing first.
8. **Reading mistakes.** Use a highlighter or your pencil to underline key words, including negatives such as "not" (for example, which of the following is *not* a factor....).
9. **Poor time planning.** Allow about a minute a question. Do not dwell on a question you don't know. Mark it, and come back to it after you have completed the questions you do know. Allow some time to review the exam before you hand it in.
10. **Changing your answers.** Avoid changing your answers unless you are reasonably sure that the second answer is correct. Research shows that your first "guess" is more likely to be correct than your subsequent choices, but if you do remember, or something in another question triggers a bell for you, by all means make the change.
11. **Making mistakes in filling out the Scantron sheet.** Try to use some of your extra time to make sure that when you transcribe your answers from the exam to the Scantron sheet, that you are filling in the letter of the answer you have chosen, that you have not skipped a question, and that you have not filled in a double answer after a skipped one, You may not believe that you would do such a thing, but I cannot tell you the number of times where this has happened. Be very careful in this stage of your exam.

## Some strategies which may work for you:

1. Cover up the alternatives do that you are focussing on the question before the answers. Try to answer the question without even looking at the answers. Then glance at the answers, and see if your answer is there, even if it is somewhat differently worded. If it is, and none of the other choices would make a better answer, than go with your answers
  2. Process the stem of the question.
    - a. underline or circle key content words.
    - b. look for limiting terms such as *always*, *never*, *sometimes*, *not*.
    - c. retrieve information from short term memory.
    - d. rephrase the question in your own words.
  3. Predict a possible answer--don't assume the answer will hit you in the eye
  4. Process each of the alternatives. Be wary of these pitfalls that may be part of the distractors (wrong answers).
    - a. jargon, nonsense phrases, made up words
    - b. familiar phrases and concepts from the course but which are not appropriate to the question being asked
    - c. a logically correct statement that is general knowledge, but again, which is not appropriate to the question being asked
    - d. repetition of the words and phrases in the question, but which do not answer the question
    - e. irrelevant links between concepts or persons in the stem of the question and the question actually being asked. For example, the stem of the question may ask about John Locke's ideas on property, and one of the distractors may mention *tabula rasa* which is a John Locke concept, but not one relevant to the question of property.
  5. Try to identify the correct response, and then re-read the stem of the question to make sure that your chosen answer actually answers the question being asked.
  6. If you can't settle on a right answer first, begin by eliminating wrong answers. When you get down to two possible answers, try both with reference to the stem of the question, and choose the one that you feel works best.
  7. If "*All of the above*" is an answer choice, this will be the correct answer if any two of the above responses are correct. On the other hand, if any one answer is incorrect, then "*All of the above*" cannot be the correct answer.
  8. As a last resort, guess (unless the exam subtracts wrong answers from right, which exams in my course *never* do). By guessing, you have at least one chance in five of being correct, which is better than no chance in five if you leave the question unanswered.
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## Other problems, Other tips?

Send them to me and I can incorporate them into this documents so that others may learn from what works for you. Many thanks.

And good luck on this and all of your courses.

