

How to Study for Tests and Exams

Studying effectively is the key to success at college. Being able to learn and work independently is a valuable skill for life, so now's the time to learn how to learn. If you read only one section of my tips, make sure it's this one. Here, we'll find some study methods that are right for you.

1.) Spread out your studying so that you can remember the information for the long term.

* Some people I knew back in middle school and high school claimed that they never studied but got good grades anyway. I don't know how honest they were being, but I can tell you this: you just can't get through college without studying. "Paying attention in class" isn't good enough.

* If you spend a class taking notes, then later that day you should spend a few minutes reading those notes. No exceptions. This will help your memory tremendously.

- Reading over your notes later in the day only takes a few minutes, so you'll end up saving time when a test begins creeping up on you. You won't have to spend as much time and energy cramming.

- Many students laugh at the idea of studying gradually rather than cramming, but spending a few minutes a day to help your long-term retention will ultimately help you get more out of your time in college.

* *Only* reading over your notes won't guarantee good grades, however. As exams roll around, you need to test yourself and make sure you're actually retaining the information and the overall concepts, not just mindlessly looking at words. Below, we'll explore ways to make sure you're actually engaging with the material by practicing with it.

* You need to judge for yourself how long you need to study for each assessment based on its difficulty, how high of a grade you need, and so on. Don't try to get by with the bare minimum, but remember that there just plain isn't enough time to memorize everything for every single test or quiz in every single class.

2.) Be able to explain a concept to someone else.

* How can you be sure if you understand a concept well? Basically, you should be able to explain it to someone else without looking at your notes whatsoever.

- For example, if the teacher says the bystander effect will be on your test, you should be able to define it and give reasons why having many people around makes it less likely for them to help. You might even need to be able to explain the event that helped psychologists identify the phenomenon. Can you do all that without looking at your notes?

- If you can't explain a concept out loud, how do you think you'll write it out on a test? When studying, say it out loud, write it down on scrap paper, imagine word-for-word how you would explain it to someone... Connect all the dots now rather than later. Just make sure the concept isn't some fuzzy idea in your brain!

- Knowing the whole thing for yourself will also help you avoid trick answers on multiple-choice tests.

- I'd recommend making a document that has each important concept and then its most relevant details listed below it as bullet points. To test yourself, make sure you're able to think of all those important details without looking at them. If you forget a certain detail, then draw a mark next to it

and make sure you remember it the next time you test yourself. Being able to do this for all the important concepts will guarantee you're on the right track.

- If you can explain the information yourself, then you should be able to walk into the room on test day with your head held high. You've already proven to yourself that you know the material, so now you just need to show your professor what you've learned.

- If you find yourself confused on this point, here's an actual example of how I could look at a concept and then think of all its relevant details:

Synergy

- This Eastern Orthodox doctrine stresses that a human must freely cooperate with God if they're to achieve deification, growing in likeness with God.

- God does not force us to become like him, but rather we must use our free will in order to freely respond to God's grace.

- With this emphasis on free will, it follows that the Orthodox do not believe in predestination, the idea that some are among God's chosen elect to receive deification while others are not.

- An example of synergy in action is the miraculous impregnation of Mary, who freely accepted to bear God in the flesh so that the incarnation would be possible.

For that specific test in my Eastern Orthodox Church class, there were fifteen terms like this that I could look at and then list all the bullet points. Not word-for-word, of course, but the general idea of each bullet point. So if somebody asked me what the Orthodox denomination's idea of "synergy" was, I could explain it to them. Once test time came, I could explain it to the paper too!

3.) Make your own list of questions so you can quiz yourself.

* Turning your notes into questions and answers is another way you could study. Here's what you do:

- Pull out a piece of paper (or make a computer document) and label it something like "Theology Midterm Questions." Next, take your notes out and put them right in front of you too.

- If something in your notes seems important, such as, "Islam is the second-largest world religion with 1.57 billion followers, yet fairly young compared to other religions (aside from cults)," put a 1 beside it. Your notes will eventually have numbers running down the sides of the pages.

- Next, on a separate question sheet, put, "1.) How big is Islam? How many followers? Why is this unusual?" Keep going until you've covered all the relevant material.

- You may want to use not just your notes but also your textbook. Remember, you should be marking in your books to focus on important information. Just like your notes, put a number beside the answer and then put a corresponding question on a piece of paper or computer document.

- You can then quiz yourself by looking at your questions and then checking your answers against what your notes and books say.

- When quizzing yourself, make sure you say the *entire* answer, whether out loud or in your head. Don't let anything in your answer be a fuzzy picture in your brain as opposed to something you could write down.

- If you get something wrong, then put a little mark by the question. Emphasize these difficult questions in your future studying.

- You may want to type out the questions and the answers yourself if you find that helpful or if you often peek ahead at future answers by accident.

4.) In my opinion, flashcards are the most helpful way to study.

* Let me say it again: *In my opinion, flashcards are the most helpful way to study.*

- Be sure you take more note cards with you to college than you think you'll need. You can always donate the extras once you graduate, and you won't have to worry about running out the night before a test.
- Cut the note cards into fourths (or at least halves) so that you can carry them around in your pocket and quiz yourself on them when you have the chance. A mid-sized binder clip can hold them together well.
- What should these flashcards have on them? It depends. I was saying earlier that you should be able to discuss every part of a certain topic, so perhaps one flashcard side could have the concept and the other side could have bullet points on said topic. (Remember, you should be able to elaborate on these bullet points in full sentences, so the basic points are just there to guide you.) I sometimes crammed everything I could in small writing on a fourth of a flashcard.
- Flashcards could also contain the names of important figures and a quick list of essentials about them.
- Definitions are fair game too.
- If you're studying a foreign language, English on one side and the foreign language on the other is a *buena* idea.
- Practice problems, along with the answer on the back, are good for math-related subjects. Work out the questions on a separate piece of paper.
- Flashcards allow the questions to be presented to you in random order, something the question-and-answer techniques I mentioned above do not. That's why I would use flashcards even for math. You don't want to memorize answers based solely on the order of your questions since they'll appear in a different order on the test.
- Note that just making the flashcards in the first place helps you study the material, so don't multitask while writing down all the information.
- In many cases, you should be able to do your flashcards forwards and backwards. For instance, you should be able to see a term on one side and then give the definition. You also need to do it in reverse: if you see a definition, give the term.
- This is especially important in foreign language classes, where you should be able to translate in both directions.
- When going through your flashcards to quiz yourself, you'll get some wrong. Put those in the back of your pile and try again once you reach them. Put the ones you get right in a separate pile. You may want to go through the ones you get wrong more times than the others.

5.) Redo homework problems and in-class problems. Also, do lots of the practice material your professor gives you.

* If you're studying a problem-based subject like math, chemistry, or economics, practice is essential.

- Be sure to redo many of your homework problems and in-class problems for extra practice. Try to make the order random so that you don't end up memorizing said order—they sure won't appear in the same sequence on the test!
- If your professor offers a set of practice questions or even an entire practice exam, then do it. Even if the practice is optional, its material will closely reflect the contents and format of the actual test.
- If the professor will "grade" the practice test for you, then let them! This will probably help your participation grade too, if you have one.

- If the professor included the answers, check over them and make sure you know darn well why you made mistakes. Even be sure that you understand why you got answers right—flukes aren't too reliable.
- If you're confused about a question, I'm sure a professor would be willing to talk you through it. You could also ask someone else who has done the practice material for assistance.

6.) Study with other people if that's your style.

* Some people learn better in groups.

- If you know some people or some person in your class fairly well, see if you can start a study group or study duo. The worst they could do is say no.
- If you can discuss the topics as if you were discussing the evening news, this shows that you know the concepts well. Conversing about the material will help you retain it.
- Be ready to ask questions and answer other people's questions. Explaining a concept to other people should help you remember it yourself. Other people's questions might reveal parts of the material you've overlooked or don't understand as well as you thought.
- Make sure you're actually working! The better you know the other people, the easier it is to wander off track. Don't be shy about telling everyone when they need to regain their focus. After all, they want to learn the material too.
- Don't feel obligated to work with people who won't actually help your learning.
- In fact, don't feel obligated to study with anybody if that's not your style. People should understand that everyone has their own studying methods. I, for one, always went solo.

7.) Don't waste your time with supposedly incredible secrets to studying.

* Studying is work. There's no way around that.

- Exaggerated speed-reading courses, special pills, ways to play messages in your sleep... It's all baloney.
- Companies know college students are desperate to find ways to dodge actual studying, so they'll take your money in a heartbeat. Don't let them.
- If there truly were some amazing secret to memorizing information without any effort, wouldn't everyone be doing it? It would be tough to keep something like that a secret!

No matter how you study, you should engage with the material in a focused, thoughtful way. By studying regularly, you'll be able to explain what you learned when exam time rolls around, and maybe you'll even remember stuff when it comes time to use your knowledge in real life!

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