

LEARNING

DEVELOPMENT & SUCCESS

STUDYING FOR DIFFERENT EXAM FORMATS

Multiple Choice

What to study: For explicit comprehension questions, focus on memorizing terms, definitions, facts, and concepts that can be stated in a succinct way. For application questions, practice applying the concepts and/or procedures to new situations. Think deeper and focus on the “big picture”.

How to study: Study in blocks of time divided by breaks (20-30 min with a 5-10 min break) over many days. Review daily. Practice by using old exams and study guides.

In-Test Strategies: Start by answering the questions you know, and code the answers you don't know (e.g., use a “?” for the ones you have some idea about but need more time to think about, and an “X” for the ones you have no idea how to answer). Answer the questions you feel most confident about first. Feel good! You've just earned marks. Next, return to the questions marked with the “?” and answer these.

Read the question twice to make sure you understand it correctly. Process it by underlying key words. Cover the answers. Predict answer. Not there? Then process the options (e.g., is this the *most* correct?). Eliminate wrong answers, then select the best option.

Essay

What to study: Focus on the major themes of the course and get the “big picture”: think deeply to understand how the main ideas and details are related. Elaborate, compare, evaluate the materials.

How to study: Use mindmaps and graphic organizers which organize around the central theme. Study in blocks of time divided by breaks (e.g., 2.5 hours: 50 minutes, 10-minute break, 50 more minutes). Start far enough ahead of the exam for the information to percolate in your mind. Generate possible exam questions and answer them in writing (or if you don't have time, make a detailed outline for each).

In-Test Strategies:

- Read the exam directions carefully. Do you need to answer all the questions? Can you choose between questions? Are there time limits?
- Make summary notes on the back of the exam sheet. Aside from getting down your ideas, this step can build your confidence in making sure you won't forget anything.
- Plan your time. How many minutes are you going to allot to each question? Plan your time and stick to it.

LEARNING

DEVELOPMENT & SUCCESS

- Read all the questions and start with the easiest question. While reading each question, quickly note a few words or phrases that come to mind. Later, when you start writing, you can use these notes to organize your answer. Starting with something you know at the beginning will inspire self-confidence, help you relax, and think clearly.
- Leave time at the end: Leave about 10-20 min at the end to read over your exam. Correct any glaring errors or mistakes which could hamper your prof's understanding of your answer, and potentially lose you marks.

Take-Home Essay Exams

Purpose: to test knowledge and expression, not retention of information.

How to prepare:

- Know the prof's expectations
- Anticipate possible questions
- Know where you can find resources (e.g., library materials, websites). Ensure all your notes are organized.
- Organize a work schedule. Leave yourself lots of time for finishing the take-home.
- Write a polished paper: well-organized, argued and clearly written.

Problem-Type Exams

What to study: Focus on solving problems and identifying the underlying concepts. Try to see a pattern (e.g., look for problems that cluster around the same theme to reduce the number of problems you will need to do. Practice by answering old exams, test, labs and homework questions.

How to study: Allow for blocks of study sessions divided by breaks (50 minutes with a 10 min break).

Short-Answer

Beware of two potential dangers! (1) Writing too **little**: too general, not enough evidence. Outcome: Don't get full marks, and (2) Writing too **much**: repetition, too much evidence. Outcome: Run out of time.

How to prepare:

- Review lecture notes and readings.
- Make a list of important terms and their definitions. Cue cards are useful here.
- Relate each term to the general ideas of the course. Mind-maps help. Add supporting evidence.

LEARNING

DEVELOPMENT & SUCCESS

How to write:

Short-answer questions are organized like a main idea paragraph in the essay exam:

1. Main idea – translate into a strong, focused topic sentence.
2. Evidence – check how many points are assigned to guide you. 3-4 sentences with evidence should suffice.
3. Summary Sentence – recap the gist of the paragraph.

Math & Science Exams: Special Techniques

1. **Review formulas.** Right before the test, review any formulas you'll need to use. Then write them on the margin of the tests or on the back of the test paper.
2. **Translate the problem into your own words.** This will help you understand what the question is asking. When you study equations and formulas, put those into your own words too. The words help you see a variety of applications for each formula. For example, $c^2 = a^2 + b^2$ can be translated as “the square of the hypotenuse of a right triangle is equal to the sum of the square of the other two sides”
3. **Use time drills.** Practice working problems quickly. Time yourself. Exchange problems with a friend and time each other. You can also do this in a study group.
4. **Analyse before you compute.** Set up the problem before you begin to solve it. When a problem is worth a lot of points, read it twice, slowly. When you take the time to analyse a problem, you may see computational shortcuts.
5. **Estimate first.** Estimation is a good way to double-check your work. Doing this first can help you notice if your computations go awry, and then you can correct the error quickly.
6. **Check your work systematically.** Ask yourself: Did I read the problem correctly? Did I use the correct formula or equation? Is my arithmetic correct? Is my answer in the proper form?

Avoid the temptation to change an answer in the last few minutes – unless you're sure the answer is wrong. In a last-minute rush to finish, it's easier to choose the wrong answer. If you redo a solution, do not erase the original answer – just draw a line through it.

Adapted from: Student Academic Success Services. (2019). *Preparing for Tests and Exams*. Queen's University, Kingston, ON.