Study SMART
BUILD THE SKILLS FOR YOUR SUCCESS

Studying for exams

About my exams

Get the details for your exams as soon as possible. Your main sources of information will initially be your Subject Outline and Past Exam Papers. These materials will identify the type of exam, its length, and some early indications of the content on which you will be tested.

It's a good idea to bookmark the Common task words PDF (107 kB) for quick reference in the lead up to your exams. You need to familiarise yourself with these instruction words in order to accurately respond to the exam questions.

Early on in the session, too, you should create your exam study plan, a regular schedule with specific goals (see Tracking your success). You might be thinking, 'It doesn't make sense to start studying for an exam three+ months before the big day!' Well, keep reading below to find out about the huge pay-off in test performance when you adopt smart long-term study strategies.

Long Term

A lot of people rely on their short-term memory by doing last-minute cramming of knowledge before an exam. Often this involves rote learning, or repeating drills to retain information over long duration study periods, one item after another. This 'blocking' is successful in the short term, i.e. while you're practising, but in test situations, the opposite is the case.

People who succeed in tests use a range of strategies to move through the cycle of learning, practising, testing, and adapting over a long period of time in short and focused study periods. What this means is that you should think of exam study like you would puppy training. Dogs are intelligent and enthusiastic learners, but after three rounds of 'sit' drills, they get bored. You need to mix it up, change the routine and monotony to 'sit', 'stay' and 'come' drills, followed by a break, then a 'walk', 'heel' and 'sit' drill addition.

What does this look like in a semester-long exam study plan? Regular short and focused study sessions. Unlike blocking, where repetition leads to automatic responses, by mixing it up you force your brain to search for different solutions because each attempt is different (Pan, 2015). Research on learning from cognitive psychology and neuroscience has shown that when this approach is used, test performance one day later is 25% better, while after one month test performance is 76% better compared to those who studied content in blocks (rote learning one thing after another).

On-going preparation

What does 'mixing it up' look like in long-term exam study plan practice? It starts with small habits and grows from there.

The 30 Second Daily Practice

This habit sets the foundation for future study sessions. It's a simple process, but one that can be over complicated if you don't stick closely to the premise. After each class (lecture, tutorial, seminar, practical, lab, etc.) take 30 seconds by yourself to write down the most important points only.

Consider this a mental sprint. Don't dwell on the details, and don't delay after class. Act quickly because if you return to it hours later you may recall the facts, but the nuances will not be as clear.

Seems easy enough, right? But how does it help you in the long run? Well, it engages your skills in interpretation, prioritisation, and decision-making, and this will, after much practice, help you become a better listener who asks better questions. It is worthwhile to invest in a small notebook you can carry around with you during the day. Give it a try with the micro-lecture below.

Activity

1. Watch this TED talk: The key to success? Grit (video, 6:12) by Angela Lee Duckworth.
2. As soon as you finish, set a 30-second timer and write down only the most important points.

You could also apply this strategy to your readings, professional interactions (perhaps with mentors or people who inspire you), and future meetings in the workplace.

Weekly and Monthly Routine

Moving through the cycle of learning from initial understanding and decoding to mastery requires different tactics over a long period of time.

In the beginning, to comprehend the new information you are taking in, you might use highlighting and underlining to identify important points in readings. This is to further clarify what you know and don't know. Handwriting and doodling can be used as a thinking tool to process information and bring ideas together.

At this point it helps to focus on explaining the 'why' in what you are learning as well as relating it to what you already know. This often comes out through explaining things to others, from peers in study groups, your family at home, or even your pet.

Finally, test yourself with practice tests (e.g. past exam papers), tests you design for yourself, and for even more challenge, tests set by others. Once you see which knowledge areas have solidified and which are still a bit shaky, you can adapt your study approach to address those needs.

What is absolutely critical is that you continue to use, organise, rearrange, and transform the knowledge using multiple modes to help reinforce what you're learning. This complements the 'mix it up' in short focused study sessions approach.

But what does this actually look like? One example might be lecture notes to mindmap, mindmap to flashcards, flashcards to infographic, infographic to study group walking discussion, discussion points

to Prezi, Prezi to practising short exam essay responses, then all over again in a different order into different end products. You can see already how a couple of these activities could be done in a short study session, while all of them could be done over the course of a few months. To help mix it up, you can switch between individual study and group study. These activities could be done in your own study groups, and you might get new ideas by attending PASS if it is offered for your units.

Study Techniques

There are many ways to engage with new and existing knowledge, to transform it, make it meaningful to you, and retain it. Here are some common multimodal approaches to use in conjunction with the advice provided above:

Examples of Study Techniques

Technique	Description	Example
Mnemonics	Translate information into another form that is easier to remember.	Cardinal Points on a compass (clockwise) *Never Eat Soggy Weetbix* = North, East, South, West
Rhyme	Use similar sounding words in regular patterns	Number of days in each month in a calendar year *30 days has September,* *April, June and November…*
Music	Applying facts and figures to music	The story of the Trojan War in Homer's *Iliad* to the tune of Soft Cell's 'Tainted Love' (video, 3:15) created by History Teachers.
Smell	Choose a scent to associate with your study material	Cinnamon for unit 1, lavender for unit 2, sandalwood for unit 3, etc.
Mind Palaces	Associate items (numbers, words, etc.) with specific images already imagined	Create a world where, for example: superhero characters represent letters and numbers (Batman = W) or movie scenes represent locations (Maximus walking in the country field in the movie *Gladiator* = ancient Rome) or associate concepts with your favourite sport team players to remember what you're learning. See also The Method of Loci for tips on memorising using location.
Practical Experience	Actively apply what you're learning	For a music class, play the instrument. For a science experiment, test it. For epic poetry, perform it.

You must also remember to manage your mind-body connection with sleep, breaks, exercise, nutritious brain food, and water.

Short term

As the examination period draws closer, the timetable will be released and you can begin to customise your exam preparation specifically for each exam. When you are studying closer to the examination, you want to begin to work in ways which simulate exam conditions, from the time of day to the environment (e.g. individual desk in an exam hall), to the layout and type of questions.

When you know the time of the day you are sitting each exam you can begin to schedule your practice activities (e.g. past exam papers) at the same time. If your exam involves individual seating with nothing more than a pen, then try doing your study or practice tests in a quiet space at home or in the Library. When you set up your own practice tests, or use those created by peers from study groups, ensure they all follow the same layout and type of questions as your exam.

My pre-exam checklist

It's a good idea to create a pre-exam checklist. This quick task requires you to consider travel logistics, essential exam equipment (e.g. your Student ID), and the date, time and location of your exams (your exam timetable).

→ What is your exam schedule?
→ When and how will you get to campus?
→ What equipment, snacks, and water will you pack in your bag?
→ Where will you leave your bag during the exam?

It's important to identify this information and make these decisions as soon as possible and write them down (your checklist). Once addressed, these administrative distractions will become part of your automated actions on the day because you planned ahead!

My exam day

In addition to modelling exam conditions in the lead up, you want to plan out your exam day from the night before to shortly after your exam. The advantage of all this practice is the reliance of your mind and body on automation or routine. This is a habit commonly used by athletes preparing for competition to reduce test anxiety and improve performance.

Activity: Exam Day Plan

This is a list-making and visualisation exercise.

Step 1

Take a few minutes to plan your exam day, starting with the night before. Write down everything that will happen:

Example Planning

Night before	Exam day morning
→ Prepare lunch for tomorrow → Pack bag with pens and exam mindmap notes → Put out running gear → Get clothes ready → Place everything I need for breakfast out → Wind down for bed with yoga / stretching / leisure reading at 9pm → Sleep by 10pm	→ Exam Day Morning → Wake up at 6am → Put on running gear → Go for short run → Make and eat breakfast + hydrate → Shower and get ready → 8am catch the bus to uni → 8:30am put bag away and power walk for 20 mins near the exam room → 8:50am Bathroom, hydrate, get ready to go in for exam → 9am Enter exam room, sit down, when time starts take a deep breath then read through instructions, pick up pen, start writing

Step 2

Now close your eyes and imagine each step, like a movie playing in your head.

Step 3

Repeat this visualisation every day for a few weeks prior to the exam.

Good luck!

References

Pan, S. C. (2015). The interleaving effect: Mixing it up boosts learning. Retrieved from

http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-interleaving-effect-mixing-it-up-boosts-learning/