Preparations for Finals

Marina Bonser, Ph.D.
EDC Tutoring Center, Folsom Lake College, Placerville, CA, 2014
There are a number of ways to help improve final exam test scores without staying up all night and cramming. By taking care of your body, planning ahead, and utilizing the resources at your disposal, you can arrive for your final exams feeling confident and well-rested.

CONTENTS:

1) Begin to prepare way ahead.
2) Develop your study plan.
3) Develop your study strategies.
4) Choose your study techniques.
5) Explore your learning preferences and accommodate them.
6) Mind your attention patterns.
7) Reduce your stress.
8) Get teacher’s help.
9) Choose your learning spots.
10) Alternate individual, pair and group learning when it makes sense.
11) Maintain your health even better than you usually do.
12) On the day of the exam.
13) During the exam.
14) After the exam.
15) References.
(1) Begin to prepare way ahead.

It will make a huge difference during your finals session.

1. **Keep up on studying throughout the semester**, minimizing the time needed to prepare for finals.

2. **Clear up your misunderstandings in time** before new knowledge will be built upon this material. Label class handouts with the course and date they're given to you.

3. **Try to finish your term papers the week before the last week of classes**, so you have extra time to study for finals.

4. **Don't procrastinate.** Procrastinating causes unnecessary stress and sets one up for failure. Instead, plan ahead.

5. **Attend workshops which will help you to increase your learning effectiveness and abilities.**
   - Note Taking Strategies, Overcoming Test Anxiety, Strategic Thinking, etc.

6. **Don't wait until the night before an exam.** All-nighters impair reasoning and memory for as long as four days which decreases ability to succeed. Distributing learning over time typically benefits long-term retention more than a short period.

7. **Keep a positive attitude and find at least some enjoyment in the disciplines** studying during the semester. This way you don't have to worry that you might forget what you learned. You will also remember more for the next semester which will give you a good start for your next year.
(2) Develop your study plan:

1. Organize your time schedule:

1). There are 168 hours in a week. Block out committed times, times for sleeping, eating, etc.

2). Look at times left and other needs.

3). Choose the best times to study for the most difficult courses.

4). Schedule the rest of your time for other courses according to your exam schedule. Be sure that your schedule allows enough time to study for each of your exams. You may have 2 exams on the same day, so you will need to plan ahead to be prepared to take them both.

5). Look back and think which of your commitments you can shed. Even a few strategically placed extra hours can make a big difference for your studying.

6). Keep a log to compare of your plans with your real accomplishments. It will help you plan better in the future. You might want to put brief notes in this log of your insights, feelings, and other information you think you might want to look into in the future.

7). Try to stick to your schedule but leave an opportunity for changes when it is necessary.

8). Before making changes always evaluate their importance by looking through the time left, and reviewing your accomplishments for each exam.

9). Periodically check back with your times left and reviews accomplished to see how you are doing and if you need to make changes.

10). Do all this in a simple brief way which would help you to save a time for studying, and not consume a lot of your time.
(2) Develop your study plan:

2. **Determine the content coverage**
   (what materials are going to be tested in the final and what the question format of the exam is).
   
   *Knowing the extent and the limits of the exam will make it much easier.*

   Find out:

1). Are readings and discussion sections included, or is the final going to focus almost exclusively on material from the lectures?
2). Is the final going to concentrate on materials since the midterm or is it going to be a **comprehensive** or **cumulative** final?
3). What format will the exam will take?
4). What materials should I study? Use syllabus and notes to determine topics to study.
5). How much emphasis was put on each topic area or chapter?

3. **Assess your needs for each course**:

1). How much of the course material you have read?
2). How do you stand going into the exam?
   
   Rate your level of knowledge: (1=none to 10=completely comprehend).
3). What percentage of the final grade is the exam worth?
4). How much of a priority is the class?

*Those answers will determine how much intensity and time you must put into your preparation.*
(3) Develop your study strategies:

1. Review your study content and organize the material within the framework of the subject.
   
   Start your studying by developing a map of the organizational patterns of the course.
   
   Each piece of information will be easier to remember and recall if it is connected to these patterns.
   
   1). Organize and separate the content into manageable parts;
   
   2). Estimate the amount of time needed to study each part;
   
   3). Adjust this approach for your general study schedule above. Be sure to keep in mind how much time you have until your first exam and in between each exam.

2. Review your syllabus. If you haven't looked at it since the first day of class, you may find new insight into the purpose and goals of the course that will help you focus on the final exam.

3. Review your previous tests, quizzes, and homework assignments:
   
   Tests that have been returned over the semester can be a good resource when preparing for the final exam. Look back over the tests to get a feel for the types of questions that the professor asks and the level of detail he/she wants in an answer. Many comprehensive final exams include some of the same questions from the tests and quizzes taken throughout the term. While you review them, make a new set of study notes, as you will retain more by writing it down.

   If you failed tests in the past, ask yourself what went wrong. Why did you struggle with items on the exam? Did you study the wrong material? Did you misunderstand what the questions were going to be like? Did you study effectively the first time? Did you miss a specific kind of problem?

4. Step back and check your progress from time to time.

5. Make a pre-test! Assemble questions, problems, essay topics, etc. from past exams and homework assignments. Take the test a week or two before the final exam to see where you need to focus your studies.
(4) Choose your study techniques.

Establish good study habits and learn study skills.

1. **Use resources in your textbook**: outlines, summaries, glossaries, etc. Review your own notes and make new ones, if necessary. Pick out key concepts and list important terms.

2. **Create cards** to study important terms and concepts, formulas, and even quotes from reading assignments. Write key words and/or phrases on cards with information about the words on the back. Mix up the order of your notes or your key words and test whether you can remember the facts and ideas out of order.

3. **Associate ideas with each other** by forming links you'll remember. Try "mapping" facts or ideas. Reword ideas or facts.

4. **Find a different logical order** for your notes and then rewrite them in that order.

5. **Use a note taking system that works for you**. Use a shorthand method you can use, remember and understand when you read later. Mark your textbook appropriately. Read first and mark selectively. Avoid “coloring” huge blocks of text with a highlighter. Write your own ideas in margins, including information from other classes.

6. **Keep study sessions short and finite**. Your time will be more efficiently spent if you know exactly how long you have to study. Wide-open spaces of time are good during the semester but now, when time is limited, they may encourage you to lose your focus.

7. **Establish an objective for each study period**. Do not stop until you have mastered the objective. Set up a plan to attack discrete pieces of information in sessions of 20 to 30 minutes then take a short break and return to the information to see how much you remember. If you feel confident that you have learned the information, then go on. If not, spend another period studying the material. The best way to see if you can remember material is to teach it to a partner.

8. **Maximize practice-testing by using a number different ways**: Highlighting, re-reading, summarizing, creating tables and schemes, using flash cards, making presentations, teaching someone, taking practice exams.

9. **Avoid frittering**, the tendency to ponder simple decisions endlessly and change your mind often. Pay attention to how you spend your minutes, and you may find out where the hours go.

10. **Avoid cramming**. Cramming causes anxiety which lowers your ability to retain information.
An example of study strategies and techniques summary:

**Self Review**
- Integrate notes with readings
- Make and review flashcards
- Do extra homework problems
- Review notes
- Make a skeleton outline to be filled out in detail from memory
- Use interactive CDs or web resources

- Create and replicate representations (diagrams, flow charts, matrices, models)
- Make a concept map of overarching themes
- Summarize material in your own words
- Make analogies

**Group Review**
- Make self-test--identify possible exam questions, divvying up content among group members
- Quiz one another at various levels
- Try the ‘close-open-close’ technique
- Fill in detail gaps in lecture notes
- Explain concepts out loud to a partner
(5) Explore your learning preferences and accommodate them.

There are many classifications of learning styles. The most popular one is dividing learners by three ways of getting new information.

- Visual learners learn better by looking at or drawing pictures and diagrams, highlighting key words or the most important points with colors.
- Auditory learners learn better by hearing someone, reading out loud, and orally repeating information.
- Kinesthetic learners learn better when doing something—making models, flash cards, presentations, extracting and restructuring information.
1. **Manage your attention** when looking through your study content. Look through faster when you want to keep the whole picture in mind, and look deeper over details when it is a time to clarify them.

2. **Give yourself enough breaks!** If you don’t, your mind will be looking for external or internal distractions, most likely distractive thoughts. Be realistic about how long you can study. Don't set up overly long study sessions. Listen to your body!

3. **Minimize distractions:** Research shows that while students prefer to study while listening to music, texting friends, or watching television, they are less likely to retain information that way.
(7) Reduce your stress:

1. **Try to relax.** Stressing out over an exam will drive you (and everyone around you) crazy and will only damage your performance on the exam. Take a break when you get frustrated. Talk to a friend. Go for a run. Grab a snack. Study for a different subject. Whatever you do, remember that this test isn't the end of the world. Twenty years from now, you probably won't even remember the reason you stressed out so much (or the grade you received).

2. **Put yourself in a happy state of mind during finals.** Remember it's normal to feel anxious about tests, and anxiety can help you work harder and concentrate better, if you keep it in check.

3. **Analyze your strengths and weaknesses.** Find your past mistakes and correct them. Use what is different about you from a typical image of a good student and use it to your advantage.

4. **Avoid communications which can get you in a stressful mood or take up your time.**
   - Don't listen to bad advice or bad-mouthing against you, your instructor, or your courses. Try to put feelings about relationships aside for the time being, so you can concentrate on your studies.

5. **Visualize that it is all going right.**
   - Imagine yourself taking the test and feeling confident that you know all the information. Picture getting all of the answers right, and focus on how relaxed you feel. Then picture the A on your test paper. When you imagine a happy ending, that’s often what happens, because you make the decisions that lead to it without even realizing.

6. **Get up your confidence!**
   - When test-time rolls around, it’s time to get yourself into confidence mode. You’ve prepared as much as you could, and now it’s time to face the test. The tip here is to do whatever works to convince yourself you are going to do really well. Just try it out, and you’ll like the results.
(8) Get your teacher’s help:

1. **Attend review sessions offered by the professor or student teacher.** These are essential for knowing exactly what topics to focus on during study. Some professors will provide a list of what topics to study, complete with a practice test. Your teacher might sum up the high points of the course, do sample questions or problems, give study tips, or sometimes just divulge about how he or she was thinking about the topics of the course. This helpful information is sometimes only provided at the review sessions, and not during regular class periods.

2. **Know your instructor’s teaching and evaluation strategies and styles.** It will help you to establish working relationship and make your learning more effective. Adapt to your instructor’s style. Tune into what makes him or her excited about the subject matter. Is the instructor a stickler for details? Does he or she like outlines and lists? Does he or she look for facts or ideas? Professors who want to see how well you can express your ideas, given the data, often allow their students to bring their notes and book to the exam. Don’t miss this opportunity!

3. **Coordinate your listening and thinking with the teacher.** In the classroom, adjust to the difference between your rate of thinking and the speed of the lecturer.

4. **Make your communication with professor or tutor more effective** by studying on your own first. You will have a more clear understanding of what you need to understand better, what you are missing, and have more specific questions to ask.
(9) Choose your learning spots.

Studying for finals takes a great amount of concentration. Find somewhere to study that is conducive for concentrating and learning: quiet, comfortable, and free of distractions.

1. **Find you favorite studying spot**
   where you are able to concentrate better.

2. **Also, try alternating your study spots when you get tired.**
   Changing scenery helps to have a new start: a library, a study room, a quiet coffee house, or different places outdoors.

3. **Studying the same subject in the same place at the same time can help a lot.**
   Your brain will be set to study as soon as you're in place, and you won't spend a lot of time getting in the mood.
(10) Alternate individual, pair and group learning when it makes sense.

1. **Find a study buddy** who is right for you, not necessarily your good friend but a person who you can EFFECTIVELY collaborate with while learning. Make sure you have the same goals and motivation and don’t distract each other. Practice explaining the concepts, formulas, and solutions to each other. It will help you better understand the material and make it easier to address the information on an exam. You can compare notes and help each other identify the correct answers from past quizzes and tests.

2. **Form study groups.** They are particularly effective when studying for finals. Assign each person in the study group a section of the course to review and “teach” to the others. Each person should develop possible test questions to cover their section. Each student can bring in two practice questions and the group can work together to answer the questions and review the accompanying material. **BE CAREFUL**-make sure the group stays on track and you have accurate information.
(11) Maintain your health

even better than you usually do.

1. **Watch your energy and anxiety levels**, keep reasonable schedules and quality of your eating, sleeping, and exercise habits.

2. When you study hard, your brain works much more intensively than usual, and gets tired faster. **Balance your brain work with more intensive physical exercises than you usually do.** It helps you restore your abilities faster to keep attention and think after long studying sessions, to reduce your more intense emotions because of stress, and to help you to have a better rest when sleeping or relaxing. **BE CAREFUL** - don’t over exercise. It will reduce your ability to learn.

3. **Stick to a regular sleep schedule.** Not getting enough sleep and rest will reduce your attention and memory. Get plenty of sleep the night before the exam.
(12) On the day of the exam:

1. **Arrive early** to get enough time to settle down before the exam starts.
   - Know the location and time of your exam.
2. **Be awake for the test.** Get a good night’s sleep, take a shower, have a citrus drink or coffee.
3. **Eat a small breakfast.** It’ll be more difficult to concentrate if you’re hungry or too full. Don’t eat anything that may upset your stomach.
4. **Bring all essential test materials and necessities.** Extra pens or pencils, scratch paper, notes (if allowed), calculator, a water bottle, tissues, cough drops, etc. You never know when your pencil is going to break or your pen is going to run out of ink.
5. **Bring or wear something which will keep you in a positive state of mind** if you know that you might feel lost or frustrated at the exam.
6. **Go to the bathroom before the test.** This is another precaution to minimize distractions during the test.
7. **Wear comfortable clothes.** You’ll want to be comfortable taking the test.
8. **Keep your communications under control.** Don’t interact with people who increase your stress or might take up your time.
9. **Look over your notes.** Review important information again before the test to refresh your memory.
10. **Have a confidence in yourself.** Remember that you studied hard and think how much you know instead of thinking what you don’t know.
(13) ON THE EXAM

Remember, during the test you might feel frustrated and be in a different state of mind. Get prepared for your success!

1. **Take the time to carefully survey the format of the test and budget your time.** How many questions are you being asked to answer? Is there a choice? How much does each part count? Then make a (tentative) plan—right up front, before you start working—of how much time you’re going to devote to each question.

2. **Choose your strategy.** Sometimes it is a good idea to start with the easiest question and finish with the hardest, or answer questions in order, and leave a couple of the hardest ones for the end.

3. **Take a few deep breaths** when you feel anxious or lost, and get yourself to a confident state of mind by reminding yourself of situations when you felt confident while studying. If you feel like that again during your exam, do it again. It will take a few seconds but make the rest of your time more effective.

*For Math and Science tests:*

4. **Make sure you understood each task or each problem correctly and chose the best way to solve it.** People’s ability to concentrate is often lower under stress. It is very easy to misunderstand the task or over think the problem.

5. **Draw a picture or diagram** if you are stuck. Sometimes it will help you to unlock your mind.

6. **Check yourself by performing opposite operations and/or estimating you answers.**

*For essays:*

7. **Answer the question in your first sentence**, and then explain your argument.

8. **Keep substance before style and length.** The quality of your thinking earns more respect from your instructor than great style essay with no depth of thought.

9. **Develop your answers fully.** Part of what’s being graded is how well you develop and explain your answer, not just how correct it is. Be sure you did not miss important points and support them with details.

10. **If you finish your test earlier, don’t leave.** Try to relax for a couple minutes, take your mind off this classroom to something enjoyable, and then review your work for grammar, spelling errors, clarity, and legibility. You might notice something that needs to be corrected, and your correction might make a difference in your grade.
(14) After the exam

1. **Get yourself a reward**, a treat, no matter if you are satisfied with your performance on the exam or not. You studied hard, and you deserve it!

2. **Take the rest of this day, or at least 3 hours off**, and do something fun and relaxing.

3. **When it is time to get back on track for studying for another exam**, **look through your schedule** to see how much time you have and how much you need to study. It will motivate you to start studying again. **Don’t do it right after the exam or during your time off!** It might reduce the quality of your rest.
The ability of focusing attention is the main point which makes your learning effective every time you study.

Let it be your guide for managing your learning process:

*for sticking to or alternating*

your learning strategies, techniques,

durations of your learning sessions,

your learning spots, and your interactions.

GOOD LUCK!
(15) References
Learning and Advising Centers Preparations for Finals Tips

3. Dr. Marcia Albert, Folsom Lake College, Folsom, CA; Test Anxiety Workshop, 2013.
6.Edited by Nicole Willson, WIKI HOW. http://www.wikihow.com/Prepare-for-Finals-in-College;