

A few simple rules for exam study and writing

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The Writing and Math Centre exists to help students improve a wide range of academic skills—from note-taking and time management to math-related problem solving and exam preparation. Free tutoring is available to students in all Faculties; this year to date, the number of students already seen exceeds 200. If you are in academic trouble and need the help of a study skills expert, please call the Department of Extension and Summer Session at 453-4646 to set up an appointment with one of our 5 tutors. The article below is just a sampling of the kind of information we can provide you with.

From early September, I hope, you've been doing frequent and continued review of lecture notes, textbook chapters, and lab/assignment work. If you haven't, you've read this just in time; it's not too late! If you are in an arts-related discipline, you should consider developing summary sheets that summarize, on one page, the gist of each lecture or textbook chapter you are responsible for. If you are in a science- or engineering-related discipline, you should consider developing concept summary sheets; again, these are one-page sheets that encapsulate, in a glance, concepts that you are learning in class. In purely practical terms, it's easier studying from 36 pages (1 summary page x 12 weeks x 3 lectures/week) than from disorganized shorthand that goes on without end. *Make an appointment with a Writing and Study Skills tutor and we'll show you how to put those summary sheets together.*

Once you've organized your notes—always the first step—you should plan a pre-exam study schedule that begins early enough in December to allow you to review term material at least twice before classes end. The reason for this is again simple and practical: it will give you an opportunity to ask questions in class about the material covered in the term. There is nothing worse than coming up against a crucial question/problem when the exam is only days (or hours) away. To avoid this, start your review early. *Make an appointment with a Writing and Study Skills tutor and we'll help you develop a study schedule that optimizes the time remaining in the term.*

After organizing your material and your schedule, you should get down to grappling seriously with the content of the course/syllabus. The most common concern voiced by students studying for exams is "How do I know what to study?" Here are a few helpful hints to get you going, or at least to help you determine what is important:

- Ask your professor to give your class a preview of the exam or a quick review of the term. Listen carefully to what he/she emphasizes; think back to what was treated with more interest, gusto, enthusiasm. Did chapter 5 on "strengths of materials" take six weeks? If so, it's probably quite important. Far too many students are reluctant to take advantage of the single most important exam resource at university: their professor!
- Consider your professor's special research interests. If she is a World War II buff and you covered WWII in a survey history course, you should probably anticipate an essay question on it. Are you ready for that? Just what is your prof's special interest?
- Consider the development of the curriculum from week to week and from month to month. Perhaps chapter one was followed by chapter 14 in the syllabus. Ask yourself "what was in that chapter 14 that made it a good follow-up to the introductory lecture?" Ask yourself, "what is my professor trying to do in structuring the course this way?" Is he building up to a main thesis? Is she allowing students to extract what is most significant for them? Is he highlighting the importance of field/lab work over textbook chapters? Is she inundating us with facts in the most objective of survey fashions? Just how is the teaching working? What am I expected to extract? Just as your professor will be evaluating you, so should you be evaluating your professor's approach to structuring and presenting the material. How is your professor presenting and interpreting the material in your course?

• Consider what you would emphasize if you had to teach the same material. What seemed most significant to you? Did you know that prepared and attentive students can anticipate 75% of exam questions? Did you know that the Library and some Departments have old exams on file? Did you know that many students find that working in study groups has a significant impact on exam performance? Think about how to optimize your own study.

• Finally, consider the role of "critical thinking" in the study process. Translated into an exam context, critical thinking means preparing for and anticipating questions that don't just require you to recall facts but to analyze, integrate, and evaluate concepts. If you are in Chemistry 1040 you may be asked on an exam to determine whether uncompressed air in a cylinder has any weight. While you probably did not receive the direct answer to this question in any class, you probably did study the effects of pressure on gas. If you integrate the notion of "pressure" into thinking about your answer, you'll realize that air in a cylinder *does* have weight; that compressed air increases the weight of any cylinder and therefore uncompressed air must have some, albeit little, weight. "Critical thinking" challenges your ability to think around a problem; expect to do some of that on your exams. If you are going into a problem-solving type of exam watch out for unfamiliar syntax (the way questions are worded). Remember how hard simple word problems were the first time you encountered them? They were hard because they looked strange—numerical formulae were buried in textual syntax. You might encounter similar strangeness on an exam. Do you know what to do? Are you prepared? *Make an appointment with a Study Skills or Math tutor and we'll show you all you'll need to know about picking apart those tricky, unfamiliar problems.*

The night before the exam you'll want to relax as much as possible. Contrary to popular belief it is not particularly productive to go to a movie the night before. Instead, you should focus on your activity the next day. Do a light review (or none at all—just don't do something that is so traumatizing that it breaks your concentration going into the exam).

It is also important that you do a few things the night and morning before to optimize your performance: put together the supplies you'll need (watch, pens and paper, calculator [if permitted], etc.); get a decent night's sleep (this is invaluable); eat something the morning before the exam (eat anything!); and, to relieve undo stress, arrive early enough to cope with the unexpected (like getting lost, finding that the location has moved, etc.). Arrive at the exam as you would at the job interview: early, prepared, and as relaxed as possible. Beware especially of peer

pressure immediately before the start of the exam. Your colleagues will be rushing around furiously, conceding defeat before they even see the exam, and making things generally very unsettling for you. If you anticipate this, it won't bother you; if you engage in the "I-didn't-know-we-were-responsible-for-that" game, you are in real trouble. Never mind what you don't know; knowing what you don't know won't help you. Instead, be calm and collected. You'll be better off. A trick of public speakers is to view the room they'll be speaking in before they have to speak. This works for exam writers too. If you've never seen an exam-ready gymnasium before, you should plan a viewing before your big debut.

Once you're seated and prepared to write the exam you should consider the following:

- the most common error students make on exams is to misread the instructions/questions. **READ THE INSTRUCTIONS AND QUESTIONS CAREFULLY.** Instructions come before exam questions and tell you how to proceed (e.g. "Do three of the following six problems"). Know how many questions you must do, what order you should do them in, etc., etc.
- after you've read all the instructions and questions, it is also very productive to write out a short time schedule for yourself. To do this, you should know the value of each question. If, for example, there are three questions, the first one worth 20% and the last two worth 40% each, then obviously you spend most of your time on the last two. If the exam is 3 hours, you might want to spend 1 hour each on the last two questions and half an hour on the first one—this leaves half an hour for reviewing your exam at the end. Do this kind of methodical calculating; it is well worth the small investment of time.
- after you've read all instructions and questions carefully and have a time schedule to guide you, you should pay particular attention to the kind of question you are answering. The format of questions require different approaches (and formats) for answering. For example, if you are answering an essay question, you should first consider developing an outline. If that essay question requires that you compare and contrast, then you must answer a certain way. If you are answering a math derivation question, then you should sketch a concept summary. Math students should also be aware that small calculation mistakes at the top and bottom of problems are the leading cause of errors on math exams. *Book an appointment with a Writing and Study Skills tutor and we'll show you how to handle short answer, essay, multiple choice, and many other types of exam question formats.*

Lastly, a word on stress. Most of what we do is stressful. Some stress is good, some bad. It is important to recognize, however, that stress is a natural part of coping with new or daunting situations. If you think you are going to get through these exams without any stress you are not being realistic. In fact, many stress experts argue that stress is a positive factor in achieving excellence. Stress motivates us to our best. So, rather than avoiding stress, you should be thinking of ways to manage it.

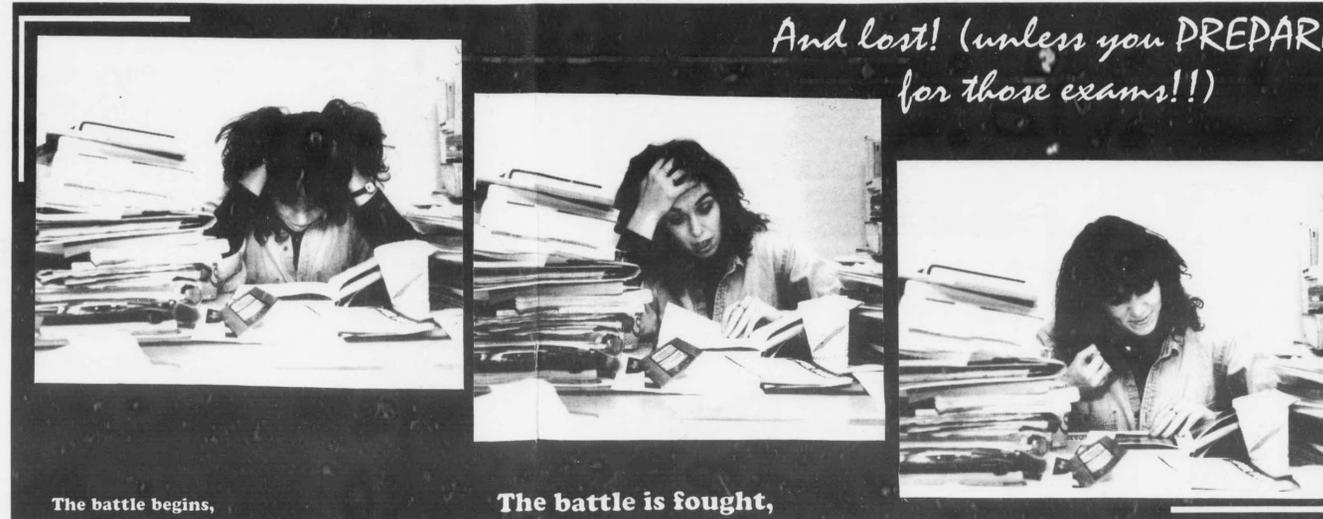
To help you manage the inevitable stress you'll be facing, here are some considerations taken from the guru of stress in the modern age, Hans Selye. Selye argued that stress is a composite of two factors—stressors (or causes) and stresses (or effects). To manage stress effectively, here is what Selye advises:

- first, identify what your stressors are. Stressors are those things that *cause* stress. Some stressors for exam writers are environment, high performance expectations, peers, family/societal expectations, difficulty of material, future and long-term goals, etc. Make a list of the things that are causing you stress. Next, interrogate those things. Ask yourself, for example, if you really subscribe to the thinking that success is measured only by an A+. Perhaps, in your situation, a B+ is more realistic. If so, you can eliminate the unnecessary stress of unrealistic grade expectations. Interrogate your list of stressors; you'll probably find that much of your stress is caused by societal assumptions you can quickly circumvent.
- secondly, once you've identified your stressors, identify your stresses. Stresses are effects of stress: how stress is manifested in your body. Stresses include sweaty palms, shortness of breath, tightness of muscles, butterflies, etc. Make a list of your own stresses and think about how you might deal with them in an exam situation. Some people find deep breathing helpful, others find that tightening and releasing large muscle groups is equally effective. *Bring a list of your stresses into the Writing and Math Centre; we'll show you how to calm your stressed physiology.*

Finally, the best medicine for stress and for exam study in general is to put your situation into the proper perspective. If you have done your best to attend all classes, keep up with course material, ask lucid questions, and do a reasonable amount of study throughout the term, you should have no great difficulty on Christmas exams. Try to keep in mind that the vast majority (yes, the vast majority!) of professors are more than fair, and are setting exams to enable you to show what you know (not what you don't know). Perhaps you haven't heard: the

key to academic success is not brilliance, but a combination of motivation, enthusiasm, organization, and hard work. *It is our job at the Writing and Math Centre to help you develop these important skills. Call us at 453-4646 and book an appointment; we'll do all we can to help you do your best on the upcoming round of exams.*

Good
Luck!



The battle begins,

The battle is fought,