

feature

Exams: making a list checking it twice

by Jill Watson

Does the thought of exams turn your stomach to stone? Does your heart race when you picture yourself trying to get prepared to write five exams in three days? Do you fear losing four months of hard work because you might fail the almighty examination?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, you're not alone. Many students become anxious about exams, and are uncertain of their ability to prepare for them. However, the task may not be as dreadful as it seems. There are some effective strategies that you can apply to your current study habits. Over the years, I have used these strategies as a stu-

dent and I now teach them as a Study Skills Instructor. They have helped me to understand that exams don't have to be feared or failed.

It is important to remember that learning and memory involve three main tasks. These are: *Selecting* the material you need to learn, *Organizing* the material so it has meaning for you, and *Reviewing* the material frequently to consolidate it in your memory.

When *Selecting* what to learn, it is important to remember that it is impossible to memorize every detail from a course. Rather, you should try to distinguish between relevant pieces of information, and nonrelevant material. You can get an idea of what is important in the course by review-

ing the course description, paying attention to material the professor has stressed, and material that has appeared on previous exams and assignments.

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The way you select material will also depend on the type of exam you are writing. If it is a multiple-choice exam, you will pay attention to specific details. If it is an essay exam, consider main ideas, relationships,

and connections between concepts. Science exams will require more diagramming and labelling processes and structures. Problem-solving exams will demand your knowledge of formulae and procedures. Each type of exam requires a different study strategy so make sure you consider the nature of the exam before you begin to prepare for it.

Organizing your material is the next step in exam preparation. You will need to gather the selected information from each course into sections that make sense to you. This may involve putting all of your definitions in one section, all of your formulae in another, and each of the units of study into their own sections. The clusters should be manageable so that you can deal with each one separately in a reasonable amount of time. Remember, once you have selected the material you want to organize, stick with it, don't go back to your notebook or textbook thinking you have missed something. Trust yourself; if you have done well up to now, chances are you know what's important! If you are unsure about how to select and organize the material, form a study group. You will be able to help each other get ready for the exam.

The final step is reviewing. You don't want to be cramming at the last minute, so make reviewing a part of your daily routine. The more often you review the material, the more likely you are to retain it. Be specific. Decide what you will review and when you will review it. Commit yourself to a review schedule. You will only need twenty minutes at a time (the average person cannot be involved in active memorization for longer than this). You have at least two weeks until begin, so start now. You can also use unscheduled time, such as between classes and while commuting to school, as effective reviewing opportunities. The key is to review as often as possible, especially the material that you are least familiar with. Some students make

the mistake of wasting time reviewing material that they already know. This is counterproductive.

Once you have selected, organized and reviewed your material, there are three additional steps you can take. Attend the last few classes. The professor is likely to review and give clues as to what will be expected on the exam. Maintain a reasonable eating, sleeping, and exercise routine. You want to be alert and able to manage yourself during the exam period. Finally, take it easy the night before the exam. Review your notes once, relax, and get a good night's sleep.

Before you write the exam, you may feel some anxiety. Don't panic. A moderate amount of anxiety can help you be alert and perform better on an exam. However, too much anxiety can interfere with your performance. If you find yourself feeling anxious during an exam there are three things you can do.

First, deep breathing may help to calm the physical tension you are experiencing. Second, interrupt the worrisome thoughts that are demanding your attention. Simply say to yourself "stop" and move on to the third step. This involves refocusing on the task at hand. For example, reread the question and remind yourself that you do know this material and that you are well-prepared. These three steps will help to alleviate the anxiety so you can complete the exam.

The purpose of giving exams is to assess the material you have grasped over the course of the term. Some people are intimidated by exams, but they can work to your advantage. By using some of the strategies listed above, you can use the exam as an opportunity to show what you know. They can reflect the hard work you have done all term. If you would like to learn more about effective study skills consider taking the Study Skills Program in January. For more information, contact the Counselling Centre, 4th floor SUB, 494-2081.

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ERRATUM:

The top of the pages of last week's *Gazette* should have read, in succession: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20.