

Tips for Exam Preparation

Before the Exam

Develop a study plan. One challenge of exam preparation is its open-ended nature: it can be tough to track progress, or to know when you are done. Likewise, you likely don't have time to follow every review method that occurs to you. Invest some time at the beginning of the exam preparation process to develop a plan. Ask yourself some guiding questions:

- **What do I know about the test?** What material will be covered? What types of questions (e.g., essay, short response, problem solving, etc.) do I expect to encounter? How much time will I have during the test? Where will I take the test? What materials, if any, can I use during the test?
- **What course materials might be useful?** Although you may not have time to thoroughly review all of these materials, try to make a comprehensive list at this step. This will help you make informed decisions when focusing your study plan later. Textbooks, class notes, past problem sets, past quizzes, the syllabus, and practice exams provided by the professor are all worth considering.
- **How much time can I realistically devote to preparing for this exam?** To develop a viable study plan, you will need to be realistic at this step. If you are going to devote 5 hours of your time to studying, they will be better spent following a 5-hour plan than following the first 5 hours of a 30-hour plan.

With this information in mind, try to write down an outline of a study plan that contains **SMART** (**s**pecific, **m**easurable, **a**ttainable, **r**elevant and **t**ime-bound) steps. Try to order these steps so that you are covering the most important material first. The activities suggested below may help when writing this outline.

Practice active review. For many students, trying to read (or re-read) all of their course materials is unrealistically time-consuming and a recipe for wandering attention. Instead of taking a linear trip through your textbook, try to find ways to review information by applying it. Each of the exercises below can give you ideas for *specific* information that you need to find and review in your book/notes.

- **Create a visual concept map or a written outline.** This can help you synthesize the big ideas in the course, as well as gain a sense of how the many ideas found in a course are related to each other.
- **Work practice problems.** Try to find or create practice problems that are similar to what you are likely to encounter on a test. Once you are able to solve a problem, ask yourself "how would I check my work if this were an actual test"?
- **Identify types of problems.** In courses with a heavy problem-solving component, you

are likely to encounter hundreds of problems over the course of a semester. These problems can likely be organized into categories, so that problems within a category utilize similar methods. Being able to quickly identify a problem as belonging to the category of “dimensional analysis problem” or “proof by induction problem” may lead you to a sense of how the problem should be addressed.

- **Create flash cards.** This is best for memorizing *literal* information like definitions and translations.
- **Try to explain a tough concept to someone else.** This can help you organize your thoughts and to identify gaps in your own understanding. Tutors can be a good resource with this strategy.
- **Write your own practice test.** Ask yourself “what would I put on this test if I were the professor?”

The Day of the Exam

By the time the day of the exam arrives, most of your prep work will be over. Your goal should be to put yourself in a good position to take advantage of all the hard work you’ve already done.

- **Physical preparation.** Your brain is a part of your body. It is just as important to maintain healthy habits on exam day as it is any other day. Make a point of getting a healthy amount of sleep the night before the test; an extra hour spent studying can be harmful if it comes at the expense of sleep. Remember to eat. Don’t caffeinate yourself more (or less) than you usually do. Consider exercising right before the exam, even if it’s just a 5-minute walk around the building.
- **Mental preparation.** Warm up your brain. Make an effort to think positively. Take some deep breaths.
- **Starting the test: scan and plan.** As soon as you get the test, scan through the questions and try to develop a plan for tackling them in the available time. Consider starting with the easiest problems first. This will ensure that you actually finish those problems, and help you build some confidence and momentum.
- **Dump memorized info onto test paper.** If you are distracted by information that you have memorized before the test, consider writing it on your test as soon as you get it.
- **Get something on page for every problem.** If you are running out of time or are stumped by a problem, try to at least write down something: a relevant rule or definition, a picture, or the first step toward a solution.

After the Exam

Improving your exam preparation skills is likely to be an ongoing process. You probably have many exams left to take in your time at Reed (or after Reed). With this in mind, consider finding a time after the test (possibly a few days later) to reflect on the process. What went well? What could have gone better? What would you like to do differently next time?