

EXAMS 101

How should I prepare for my exams?


Preparation for exams should begin on your first day of classes through a mixture of studying, completing homework assignments, and reviewing study materials and course content on a regular basis. There are many things you can do in and outside of class to ensure exam success, but there are four main areas where you can focus to help you be successful:

Give your attention

1. **Take notes during lectures.** Your notes are the record of your time in the class, so you want them to be as helpful as possible. There is no way you will be able to write down everything your instructor says verbatim, so make sure you are making notes on key terms, ideas, vocabulary, or other pertinent information.
2. **Engage in your classes!** If you don't understand something, ask for clarification. If your instructor is providing in class review or exam overview, pay attention. Your instructors want you to be successful; pay attention to things they are spending a lot of time talking about. Those are things that could show up on your exam.
3. **Make sure you attend the class before your exam.** There will likely be exam specific information provided in that class, and missing it may mean you miss important information that could help you be successful.

Review Your Material

1. **Every night after your class, review your notes from in class.** This important step can be the difference between success and failure. The biggest benefit of review on the same day is that you can add in any information you didn't



get a chance to jot down during class. Time is your enemy when it comes to memory; the more things you can put down while it is fresh in your mind, the more you are setting yourself up for success.

2. **For exams where memorization is key (like Art History), flash cards are your best bet.** Put an image of the artwork on the front, and all pertinent information you need to know on the back. The act of creating your flashcards is studying in and of itself; reviewing them is only reinforcing what you already know, and ensuring you can repeat it when you need to.

3. **Pay attention to the things you struggle to remember.** Those are the areas where you are best to spend your time reviewing prior to writing the exam.

Practice

1. **If possible, complete practice questions prior to writing your exam.** Are there old copies of exams your instructor would be willing to provide? Are there examples of questions they could give you? It can be helpful to look at other exams from your instructor. It will give you clues to the ways they format their questions and the types of responses they are looking for.

2. **Study with friends!** There is an enormous value to studying with friends. They probably remember specifics from class that you do not, and vice versa. Between the group of you, you will have a rich, full picture of all the course content. Consider arranging a regular study group with friends; the regular review will ensure you are on the pathway to exam success.

What if I have been so busy with my studio homework that I haven't had a chance to study at all?


While studying and review should be a regular, ongoing part of your academic career, there are occasions where your time has been spread thin and you'll need to cram. It should be noted that cramming is not an effective study technique; you will not retain the information as well or for as long as you would if you were studying regularly. However, there are times when it is all you have thus will have to do. In these cases, there are a few tips you can utilize:

1. **Last minute cramming needs to be distraction free – you're down to the wire so you need all the focus you can get.** Make sure you have a full stomach (a growly tummy is distracting and you won't be able to concentrate if you're ravenous), your work space is comfortable, and anything that may draw your attention away is removed. Turn off your Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat; put your phone on silent, put it in another room, or better yet turn it off.

2. **Take brief breaks regularly.** It does not seem intuitive to take breaks when time is of the essence, but your brain needs it. Set a timer if you need to, but every hour or so take a five minute break. Get up, stretch, give your eyes a break, and then get back to it.

3. **Be strategic with what you are studying.** The night before is not the time to crack open your text book and start reading from page one – you are too late for that. Read chapter summaries, titles and subtitles, and look for key terms and concepts. Review old exams and your notes, and spend time with any review questions provided by your instructor.

4. **Even if you're feeling unstudied, make sure you get some sleep the night before the exam.** Going into your exam exhausted will ensure you do poorly. Make sure you've had



something to eat so you aren't distracted or unable to focus because you're hungry.

My exam is today. What should I do before it starts?

Ideally you'll have been studying diligently all term, and this exam is something you are feeling prepared and confident about. Even if that is the case, or if it is not, there are some tips to help you set yourself up for success before even receiving the exam:

1. **Go to the bathroom before you go in.** You may not have the option to leave and return if you need to, and you don't really want to waste valuable exam time in the washroom.
2. **Put your cell phone on silent for the exam, or better yet turn it off.** You don't want anything that can distract you, and you don't want to be a distraction to others either.
3. **Sit where you will not be distracted,** and in a space where you can hear the instructor and see any screens you may need to for the exam.

Are there any tips to help me manage the exam itself?

Yes! There are many ways you can help to ensure you are using in class exam time effectively:

1. **When you receive the test, look through the whole thing before answering any questions.** This will give you a sense of what is being asked of you and where you will need to spend the most time based on your instructor's expectations.
2. **Pay attention to the point value of each question, particularly short and long answer questions.** That point value is your clue to how much your instructor is looking for,

and to how much time you should be spending on that. A 2 point question does not need a full page response – and similarly an 8 point question would need more than one sentence.

3. **Read each question carefully,** and look for the keywords that tell you what to do: compare, contrast, describe, explain, etc.
4. **Write neatly and legibly.** If your instructor can't read your handwriting they can't mark your exam.
5. **If you get to a question that stumps you, just move on to the next one;** don't spend a bunch of time stressing out about not knowing something, it will only serve to make you feel anxious and undermine your confidence. Most likely you will have time at the end of your exam to go back and answer anything you missed, and there may be something in a later question that either sparks your memory.
6. **Don't leave anything blank.** Even if you think your answer is wrong, jot it down anyways. If you have no idea what something is and you're making it up, still write something down. Unanswered questions are guaranteed zeros; if you've written down something there may be a partial mark you can get, or maybe you've second guessed yourself and the answer you thought was wrong was right.
7. **Before you hand in the exam, take a look through.** Did you miss any questions? Did you answer enough for each question? Changing your answers is not recommended; often students will change the right answer to the wrong one just from second guessing themselves. Be confident in your knowledge of the material, and be confident that your first instinct was the correct one.

What can I do to manage my test anxiety?

We all suffer from anxiety from time to time, and exams are often where our anxiety can get the best of us. There are some tips you can use to manage yourself during the exam to mitigate the anxiety you're feeling:

1. **The best defense against anxiety is preparation.** If you are well studied, have been completing regular review and handing in all assignments on time, you have nothing to worry about – you've got this!
2. **If you find you're feeling starting to feel nervous, put down your pen or pencil, close your eyes, take a few deep (quiet) breaths, and relax your muscles.** Remember that you are in control.
3. **Use positive self talk.** You can be both your own worst enemy and your biggest cheerleader – in exams you need to be your cheerleader. Remember everything you have done, know that you have been working hard, and that you are doing your best, and keep telling yourself that.
4. **Take your time.** There is no award for the first exam handed in, so being thoughtful and considered in your responses is better than rushing.
5. **Expect anxiety.** Even if you are the most studious and committed student, the nature of exams will make you feel a bit of stress, so knowing that it will happen will help you prepare for it.

What if I have questions about exams or studying that aren't covered here?

ACAD has numerous learning supports available, including the Writing Centre and Drop-in Tutoring. These services are available to you as a student for no additional charge.

The Writing Centre is by appointment; email writingcentre@acad.ca.

Drop-in Tutoring is available all semester long in the Luke Lindoe Library; email tutoring@acad.ca for hours.

When I was in high school I had accommodations for my exams, and I'd like to have that at ACAD. How can I get exam accommodations?

Any student needing accommodations for exams needs to get in touch with the Learning Assistance Office. For more information, contact: learning.assistance@acad.ca.