

# Foster Care to Academic Success

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## How to Study for Tests

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When I was a college student, I never worried too much about taking tests. I was a good student and I was generally pretty well prepared, but beyond that I always went into an exam with the feeling that there was a chance for a miraculous burst of genius ... It was only a couple of days later, when the test was returned, that my stomach felt queasy – NO chance for a miracle then!

If you've kept up with your class work in the weeks prior to a test, you shouldn't have to sweat too much. You've taken notes and reviewed them, you've done all the readings and understood them, you've turned in every homework assignment and you've spoken to your professor or the TA if there was something you didn't understand. You organized a study group and worked with them regularly.

Yeah, in a perfect world.

Chances are, with three or five classes and three or five professors who each think theirs is the only course you're taking or at least is the most important one, you've got some catching to do in order to be really prepared for a test.

So, here are some suggestions to help you study efficiently for a test, to help you (hopefully) relax before a test, and to help you take a test and get the best possible grade on it.

#### Time Management

Time management is one of the most important skills you can learn as a college student. If you manage your time wisely throughout the semester, you will find studying for tests much easier because you will already be partly prepared.

Hopefully you made a calendar at the beginning of the semester. You listed every important event, both academic and personal, and so you should know well in advance when you are having a test. You've worked out a study schedule and kept to it for the most part. **Preparing**

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for a test involves more concentrated studying than what you do every night of the week, but it shouldn't overwhelm you if you've developed good time management skills.

### **The First Step – finding out what kind of test it will be and what will be covered**

It is very important to know what kind of a test it will be – multiple choice? Essay? True or false? A combination? If possible, look at previous tests from this class. Ask students who took the course before what the tests are generally like.

Listen to what the professor says will be on the test and WRITE IT DOWN. If he or she gives out a study guide, you're in luck! If the professor doesn't volunteer the information, raise your hand and ASK what will be covered. It's very important to know if the test will be based only on information that was presented since the last test, or if it will be cumulative, covering everything learned through the course of the semester.

Here are some other ways to figure out what will be on the test:

- Anything that was in a handout or written on the board
- Anything the professor stressed or repeated during lectures; anything (duh) the professor said was important or might be on the test
- Any questions the professor asked during class discussion
- Pay particular attention to things the professor says in the class or two just prior to the test

Again, talk to students who took the course before – ask if the professor usually takes questions from the readings, or from the lectures, or from class discussion. Ask if the professor likes every little detail in your answer, or if he's a "broad picture," "understand the concept," "sweep of the brush" kind of a guy. Ask if the professor counts off for grammar or spelling. Someone who took the class before is often your best source of information on what the test will cover, what you need to study, and how best to answer the questions.

It's also good to know how the test will be graded, and how much it counts towards your final grade.

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### The Nitty-Gritty – Getting down to studying

1. **Find a quiet place, free of distractions.** Let your friends know you're studying for an important exam and that they shouldn't disturb you. **Turn off your cell phone,** and DON'T sign onto instant messaging if you are using the internet.
2. **Gather all of your materials before you start** –
  - Pens, paper, laptop, calculator, note cards
  - Textbook, class notes, handouts
  - Water and something (healthy, hehe) to munch on
3. **Set goals.** It is much better to study for a test in several short bursts with a wrap-up session the evening before or the day of the exam. If, for example, you are being tested on three chapters, set up four two-hour study sessions – one for each chapter and one for final review.
4. **Study for half an hour, or an hour at most, and then take a five- or 10-minute break to refresh your mind (and possibly, your attitude!).**
5. There are many different ways to study, and you will quickly find out what works best for you. Here are some suggestions –

### Ways to Study

- **The Reading Method.** Read and re-read and read your textbook again, class notes and handouts one more time after that. Read all of the scribbles you made in the margins of your textbook, and the notes you made based on those comments and questions. Read everything you highlighted OUT LOUD if you are in a place where you won't disturb anybody else. If you are in a place where you'll bother other people – move! Reading out loud makes your brain focus more clearly on the words and you are less likely to find yourself drifting away. Repeat important phrases to get them stuck in your mind. Make sure, though, that you *understand* what you are reading. Finally, if there are questions at the end of each chapter, answer them. (Again – hopefully you already did this.)
- **The Writing Method.** Don't just read – write! Rewrite the important things in your own words. Elaborate if you can. As with reading out loud, writing is *active* learning and you are more likely to remember things if you write them down.
- **Flash Cards.** Making flash cards is a great combination method, and it's especially good if you need to learn dates, vocabulary/definitions, short facts or formulae. You remember how to do it from elementary school – on one side of the card you write down the word or the date or the name of the formula, and on the other side you write the answer. Then, you test yourself or have some kind and generous soul test you. Flash cards can be your best friend before an exam – write them up early and keep them in your backpack, and then every 10-minute break can be a study session.

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- **Every Good Boy Deserves Fudge.** Or is it, “does fine”? Mnemonics are an excellent memory tool if you need to know a set of information like the planets in order or the notes on a scale. Words are wonderful! Here is a nonsense poem written by a fifth grader when she had to remember the metric system – kilometer, hectometer, decameter, base, decimeter, centimeter, millimeter. She’s 19 years old now, but she can still recite this poem by heart...

King Henry Died when he Began to Drink that Chocolate Milk.  
His mother cried, he's been kilo-fied, or hecto-ed or deco-ed or based.  
But old King Henry's sister said, oh no, it's more of a disgrace!  
He's deci, centi, milli-milled as he stuffed his face.  
So don't drink chocolate milk I warn,  
Unless remember you do  
To make big things small you multiply  
To make small things big you must divide  
If you forget, you'll surely find  
Chocolate milk will get you, too.

- **Find a Study-Buddy.** It can be very helpful to study with a classmate. You can test each other, prompt each other, show each other flash cards, and encourage each other. One of you may know or understand something the other doesn’t, and then you will both get more out of a study session – the one because you learn something you missed in class and the other because there is no better way to learn than by teaching someone else. **You may also want to participate in a formal study group.**
- **OFA’s Own Tried-and-True Sooper Dooper Method.** Well, this is how I studied for tests when I was in high school and college, and it worked for me. I studied history, but I think it could work for many other subjects. Not so sure about math, but we will deal with math in a separate section. I would take every important piece of information that was highlighted in the textbook or written in my notes and look at it from every angle I could think of:

***George Washington, first president of the United States, was in office from 1789-1797.***

- Who was the first president of the United States? – George Washington
- Who was George Washington? – first president of the United States
- What country was George Washington president of? – the United States
- What dates was George Washington in office? – 1789-1797
- Who was president of the United States between 1789 and 1797? – George Washington

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Let's try this one:

***Chlorophyll is the molecule that absorbs sunlight and uses its energy to synthesize carbohydrates from CO<sub>2</sub> and water. This process is known as photosynthesis and is the basis for sustaining the life processes of all plants.***

- What is chlorophyll? – the molecule that absorbs sunlight to synthesize carbohydrates from CO<sub>2</sub> and water.
- What molecule absorbs sunlight to perform photosynthesis? – chlorophyll
- What is photosynthesis? – the synthesis of carbohydrates from CO<sub>2</sub> and water
- What does photosynthesis do? – use sunlight to synthesize carbohydrates from CO<sub>2</sub> and water
- Why is photosynthesis important? – it is the basis for sustaining the life processes of all plants

I always believed that if I looked at each piece of information from every angle I could think of, there wasn't a question the professor could ask that I hadn't already thought of! I would write these questions down, and have a friend ask them of me. For me, this method worked very well. Try it. 😊

- **Math Tests.** Studying for math is different than studying for other subjects. **Math is learned by doing problems. Therefore, ALWAYS do the homework.** In math, each class builds on every previous lesson; falling a day behind puts you at a disadvantage and falling a week behind can be a disaster. On the other hand, because each class builds on every previous lesson you are always reviewing and you have less to learn at the end of the chapter or semester if you have kept up with your homework.
  - When you are studying for a test, go over each section and rework the problems – cover up your answers and try them again.
  - Explain formulas and mathematical strategies in words, out loud, to be sure you understand them. Write them down on index cards to study every time you have a spare minute.
  - Work problems from the review sections at the end of chapters. In studying for math, the key is to work problems, over and OVER.

## **Cramming – what if, despite your best intentions, you've waited till the last minute?**

It's been said ... maybe it's just an urban legend ... that sometimes students don't start studying at all until the night before the test, around two o'clock in the morning. Nah, must be an urban

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legend, don't you think? The most important thing to remember when you cram actually has nothing to do with studying. It is:

**Get at least three hours of sleep the night before any test**

**And don't forget to set your alarm – or better yet, ask for a wake-up call (or two or three...) from a friend.**

Now here are some suggestions on how to make the most of your cram session:

- **Eat something before you start**, but avoid sugar and caffeine which might make you hyperactive (boing! boing!) and less able to concentrate on your books.
- **Find a quiet, comfortable place to study but don't be too comfortable or you risk falling asleep.** Relax – take a deep breath and compose yourself to study. And turn off your cell phone!
- **Decide what is most important to learn; focus on main ideas, general concepts and key formulas. Cover the most difficult information first, while you are fresh. Skip the details for now and come back to them only if you have time.**
- **As always, repetition is important** – read and re-read what you highlighted in the textbook and handouts; write down critical facts on a sheet of paper and go over them. **Study the main concepts until you are sure you know them.**
- **Take a five-minute break to stretch and clear your mind at least once every hour.**
- **Go to bed BEFORE you are exhausted, and get some sleep before the exam.**

The steps below are called “an alternative, structured approach to cramming.”

- **Identify five key concepts that you know will be covered on the test and write one each at the top of a separate sheet of lined paper.**
- **Below each concept, write an explanation of its significance, definition of its meaning, or answer to the question it poses. Use your own words, from memory.**
- **Compare your answer with the textbook, lecture notes and handouts.**
- **Edit, change, or expand upon your answer based on the information you read.**
- **Number your pages in order of importance.**
- **If you have time, add up to four more key concepts and follow the same steps as above, inserting them in the proper sequence of importance.**
- **Study the pages in order of importance.**

**Stop cramming AT LEAST 15 minutes before the exam. DON'T frantically look at your notes while you're waiting for the professor to hand out the test paper. Whatever you remember in the last 10 seconds will throw everything else straight out of your brain.**

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### Test-taking Anxiety

Most people are nervous before they take an exam (unless they believe in that miracle of the sudden burst of genius); it's only natural and normal. There are some steps you can take to reduce test-taking anxiety, the most important of which is, well, making sure you are adequately prepared.

Besides that, here are some suggestions to calm your nerves before a test:

#### DO:

- **Approach the exam with confidence** – concentrate more on the things you know and less on what you wish you'd learned.
- **Remind yourself that a test is only a test.** It's important, YES, but it doesn't actually define you as a human being. If you studied your hardest and do your best, it is the most that can be expected and you can be proud.
- **Get a good night's sleep and eat something** before the test – NEVER take an exam on an empty stomach!
- **Go over your study notes an hour before the test, but then take a deep breath and close your books.**
- **Avoid classmates who have the heebie-jeebies** before a test and are likely to pass them on to you.
- **Allow yourself plenty of time to get to class;** you want to arrive early enough to settle in and make sure you have everything you need.

#### AND ONE BIG DON'T:

- **Try to do any last minute cramming – for every new fact learned, three old ones will zoom straight out of your head.**

**You can do it!**

**With these tips and having worked hard all semester, you'll be prepared for and ready to take any exam.**

**Good luck!**