Preparing for Finals Podcast

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Hi, my name is Sandra Sanger, and I’m a graduate instructor with the Student Academic Success Services here on campus.

Imagine this: It’s the end of finals week and you’ve just finished the grueling process of taking your last final exam. You lean back, breathe deeply, and allow a slight smile to spread across your face. You’re done! And you know you aced it – you anticipated exactly what was going to be on the exam, knew the material cold, and breezed through it without worries. Sounds good, right? So, let’s get you there. Listen ahead and I’ll give you five strategies to help you sail through finals week unscathed.

Strategy Number 1: Plan Ahead

Preparing for and taking final exams can take a lot of time and energy, and it’s important to be sure to plan well to make the most of your time. It’s never too early to start. For example, you can start reviewing and summarizing your notes after each lecture to help cut down on your workload when the exam rolls around. You’ll also want to consider the following to plan effectively.

First, what topics will be covered on the exam? Is it cumulative, or does it just cover the material taught since the last exam? Make a list of the broad categories of topics on which you will be tested. You can fill this in with more detail as you start to study. Second, what types of questions will be on the test? Is it all multiple choice or problems to solve? Are there essay questions involved? Knowing what kind of test you’re facing will help you to focus your preparation. Third, from what course materials will test questions be drawn? Will all of the questions be based on material presented in lecture, or are topics in the assigned readings fair game as well? Again, knowing where the questions will come from will help you to focus your studying efforts and allow you to prioritize what you need to study. You probably have different levels of mastery over the various topics that have been covered in each of your classes. Figuring out what you do and do not know will allow you to study more efficiently as well, as you can hone in on what you don’t know first, followed by more familiar material later, if you still have time.

Now that you know what the test will involve and what you need to study, it’s time to get specific about how you will study, leading us to the next strategy.

Strategy Number 2: Make a study schedule

If you’re like most students, you may have noticed there never seems to be enough time to get in all of the studying you might like to do. This happens for several reasons, in part because of realistic demands placed on your time. Beyond these realistic time constraints, however, students also struggle with getting everything done because they overlook the importance of getting really specific about scheduling their time. Making a schedule for finals starts with the realization that some commitments will probably need to be put aside for in the weeks while you are preparing for and taking finals. Try to cut back as much as you can – ask for time off from work if possible and let family and friends know that you’ll be disappearing, or at least less available, for a week or two while you’re grappling with finals. Next, figure out how much free time you actually have in the weeks or days leading up to finals and during finals week itself. Subtract out time for classes, work, and other set obligations. Then start adding in study periods to the times that
remain. Try to follow these guidelines to structure your study time and make it more effective. Be specific about what you will study. For example, commit to writing potential test questions and drafting responses for 3 topics drawn from your list you’ve already put together, rather than simply saying that you will study psychology after work. Next, keep study times for each subject to 2 hours or less. Switch topics at least this often to keep your mind fresh and try to study dissimilar subjects when you switch. Avoid falling into marathon cramming sessions by starting early and spacing out your study periods. Six hours of study time spread over four days is much more effective than six hours spent in the early a.m. hours before your exam. And finally, remember that the unstructured time of finals week can be deceiving. Continue your schedule through finals week to maximize your efficient use of the extra time that is available after classes end. Resist the temptation to “decompress” as soon as classes are over. You’ve worked hard this semester, and one extra week of well-planned work during finals will ensure that your grades reflect your extra efforts. Having said that, you’re welcome and encouraged to include some down time in your schedule. All work and no play can quickly lead to burnout and actually make your studying process less efficient. But be careful not to let your down time dominate – be mindful of your overall goal of doing well and remember that at the end of finals week, you’ll have plenty of time and cause to celebrate.

Both your body and mind should be involved in preparing for finals. Taking care of your mind, but neglecting your body is sure to come back to bite you. This leads me to the third strategy.

Strategy Number 3: Prepare Physically

Almost all students have tried to pull an all-nighter at some point in their academic careers, fueling themselves with Red Bull or coffee and hoping that those hours spent reading through the text one more time (or maybe for the first time) will be enough come exam time. In reality, depriving yourself of sleep and good nutrition (especially on a chronic basis) will work against you when it comes to recalling and applying the information you’ve just tried to cram into your head, not to mention concentrating at test time. The third preparing for finals strategy is therefore focused on keeping your mind in good shape by focusing on keeping its partner, your body, in good working condition. Making a schedule will be your ally in ensuring that you’re getting enough sleep. Try to include at least 6 hours of sleep per night in your schedule, and do your best to avoid throwing off your body’s rhythm by going to sleep late and attempting to wake up at 4 am to continue studying. We’re all alert at slightly different times – paying attention to when you’re most able to focus and concentrate and scheduling your most difficult study tasks during those times is important as well. Subsisting on caffeine and sugar might help to make you feel more alert for short periods of time, but it’s bound to lead to a heavy crash later on. I’m not going to tell you to totally cut these college student staples out of your diet, but I do recommend that before an exam, you try to eat a light snack, such as a piece of fruit, glass of orange juice, or granola bar, that will help to evenly fuel your body and brain through the test. Finally, including light, regular exercise in your schedule will help to calm your body, as well as your mind.

Now that you’ve done everything you can on your own to prepare for finals, it’s time to turn to the next strategy, which involves working with others to make the most of your study time.
Strategy Number 4: Form study groups

The old saying, “Two heads are better than one,” is especially true around finals time, provided that you choose the right heads to group together with. We’ve probably all joined study groups in which we had a lot of fun, but couldn’t name a single thing we studied, if we even got to studying at all. Be sure to choose study partners with whom you can maintain a commitment to studying, keeping in mind the overall goal of doing well on finals. A generally helpful structure for study groups includes time spent together and time spent apart, with a focus on different tasks at each time. You can start by meeting with a partner or group and reviewing together what topics you believe will be on the exam, as well as the types of questions involved – the first steps of the study plan discussed earlier. It’s also helpful to brainstorm together potential test questions. After this, group members should spend some time working independently to organize and review their own materials, attempt to answer some of the potential questions they identified earlier, work through study guides, solve practice problems, write answers to sample essay questions, and so on. After you’ve reviewed on your own, return to the group to compare notes. Discuss the answers you have developed; argue your point of view; teach your partners what you know; learn from them things that you don’t know; and determine whether further review is still needed. Each of these steps will help you to better learn the material so that recalling it at exam time is easier. Obviously, since this is a multi-step process, you will need to start planning your group meetings and independent study times in advance. There is a huge potential payoff that can come with working together collaboratively with others to prepare for finals. You’re more involved with the material, learn from others information you may have missed, and at the very least, have someone else to commiserate with about just how much information you’re expected to know for your exams.

Study groups are an important source of help and support, but sometimes it becomes clear that additional help is called for. This brings me to the fifth and final strategy: get outside help if needed.

Strategy Number 5: Get outside help if needed

There’s no need to spin your wheels in frustration when it begins to seem that getting through finals intact is going to be nearly impossible on your own. Numerous resources for students struggling with both academic and personal concerns are available on campus. Student Academic Success Services, or SASS, offers one-on-one assistance (and workshops) for improving academic skills and strategies for success. Sample topics include: test preparation & test taking, time management, note taking, concentration, and stress management. SASS also offers more than 100 online handouts for self-guided assistance with academic issues & strategies. You can reach SASS by visiting 109 Eddy Hall or calling 612-624-3323 to schedule an appointment. Online at http://www.ucs.umn.edu/lasc/lasc.html. If personal concerns such as mood or anxiety issues are preventing you from getting the results you want, you can contact University Counseling and Consultation Services at the same number, 612-624-3323, to schedule a one-to-one appointment with a counselor to address your needs. On the St. Paul Campus, visit the SMART Learning Commons inside Magrath Library to take advantage of learning support services such as workshops on academic skills development and personalized drop-in Peer
Learning Consultants. Finally, don’t forget about the assistance that is available from your course professors and TAs. Be sure to go in with specific questions, and don’t hesitate to ask for help when you need it. Effective and efficient students are those who make use of all of the resources available to them.

Good luck to you as finals approach and remember the following strategies to help you stay on course: (1) Plan ahead; (2) Make a study schedule; (3) Prepare physically; (4) Form study groups; and (5) Get outside help when needed. It’ll be summer before you know it.