

Dr. T's ~~Helpful Hints~~

No. 107: Studying for Exams



Stress. Anxiety. Panic. Sleeplessness. “All-nighters.” Stale coffee. Writing cramps. Disappointment. Heartache. These are all the things that make exams fun and are a traditional part of college. I often wonder why students don’t beg their teachers to give more exams. After all, if it wasn’t for exams, what incentive would you have to study and learn? Of course, if you want to take a more mundane approach to studying for exams and preserve your health and sanity, try following some of these time-tested hints:

- **Attend class. Do the readings.** The most efficient way to study for an exam and do well is to attend every class prepared. As Woody Allen once said, “80% of success is just showing up.”
- **Form a study group.** Do it at the beginning of the term and meet regularly. See Helpful Hints # 5: Study Groups.
- **Do not just read your notes.** Simply reading your notes over and over is a terrible way of preparing for an exam. This process is too passive. You are more than likely to get bored with reading them and will dupe yourself into thinking you actually understand what you wrote down. Instead of simply rereading your notes, reread them and then rewrite them in a different fashion (i.e., reorganize your notes). You might want to make “flash cards” for important terms or concepts. Writing things down is more active and will help you remember the material better.
- **Anticipate the exam questions.** Rarely should a student be surprised by the questions that are on an exam. They generally cover the main topics in class. There is usually one question about each “main theme” presented in lecture and/or the readings. As part of your exam prep, write down what you think the questions will be. This is still a valuable exercise even if the professor promises to hand out the exam questions ahead of time. Anticipating the questions lets you know if you are successfully identifying the main themes and important points of the course. Once you have the questions written down, outline an answer to each.



- **Talk to yourself.** Better yet, talk to a friend. If you can explain what you learned in class to a friend without having to use notes, you are in good shape to take an exam. In case you don't have a friend who wants to listen, talk to yourself about your notes. Do this while showering, riding the bus or waiting in line for a chai tea latte. If you have anticipated several exam questions, rehearse your answers in your head without relying on notes. Not only does this help you review, but it builds your confidence. Want to know a secret? This is how Professor Gill prepares for lectures and conference presentations. I use long runs or my drive into school as times to mentally run through my upcoming lectures.
- **Get to sleep.** While everyone has adventurous stories about how they miraculously bagged an "A" after cramming all night long, the truth is that the brain doesn't function well without adequate sleep. (You want to hear something scary – this problem gets worse with age and you are not immune from aging!) If you attend lectures regularly, keep up with the readings and homework, and prepare your answers a few days before the exam, you can have a relaxing evening at home and be refreshed the following day. (P.S. Caffeine does not help you think better. In fact, some studies suggest that it actually hinders thought processes. However, if you have a cup or two in the morning as part of your normal routine, don't skip it. Humans are creatures of habit and you should keep your normal routine up to the day of the exam.)
- **Be confident.** As you walk into the classroom before an exam, pause for an instant and tell yourself that you are prepared and you know the material. If you followed some of the hints above, you have every reason to be confident.
- **Wish yourself good luck?** Luck is merely preparation meeting opportunity.



LEGAL DISCLAIMER: "Dr. T's Helpful Hints" are only suggested practices and do not guarantee academic success. You are responsible for making the choices that determine how well you do in school. Choose wisely.