

Have an Effective Cram Session

By now your faculty and advisors have told you that you shouldn't wait to the last minute, that cramming only produces short term memory, and that you may forget what you reviewed before you get to the test. Even the definition of "cram" implies poor preparation: "To force, press, or squeeze into an insufficient space; to prepare hastily for an impending examination."

All of this is true, but if you haven't opened a book or reviewed your notes until now, cramming may be your only study choice – a poor one, yes – but your only hope for passing tomorrow's exam! Here are 5 suggestions that can help make your Cramming Session more effective.

1 DON'T PANIC!

Panic will only hurt your ability to concentrate and plan your critical study session. Take a few deep breaths, relax, and develop a strategy for success – Use the How, What, When, Where approach to success.

2 PLAN **WHAT** YOU NEED TO LEARN

Knowing what you need to know for the exam is essential. Review the text, your notes, and the teacher's test notes/guide, if there is one.

Make a list of the information you need to know. Put the things you already know at the bottom (*don't waste time relearning what you already know*) and the things you don't know at the top.

3 PLAN **WHEN** YOU CAN STUDY

Since it is the night before the exam, your time is short – so don't waste a single moment. Most students don't function well without some sleep. So, set aside the hours you need to recharge. You know best, do you need to take short naps throughout, or do you need to plan for one longer sleep session just before the exam.

4 PLAN **WHERE** YOU WILL STUDY

Since your time is limited, you need to maximize your ability to learn. The TV, friends, other students, your iPod, your phone, etc. are all distractions which will pull your brain away from what you are studying. So, find a quiet, comfortable, well-lit location that will support your complete concentration on what you are trying to learn.

5 PLAN **HOW** YOU WILL STUDY

To begin, there are two basic steps to the HOW: First, what will you need to have for your study session; and Second, what study techniques will you use to help you be successful tomorrow in the exam.

Write these down and make a time-line that will help you implement your plan in the time you have allotted. Don't forget your time for sleep, time to gather your materials, and time to take everything with you to your "premier" study space.

See the following suggestions for the two basic steps of HOW:

STEP ONE: WHAT WILL YOU NEED TO HAVE FOR YOUR STUDY SESSION?

Review the following list of things you might need for your study session. Identify those you need and add any others you believe are important to have available. Remember, time is of the essence so you won't have time to go back and pick-up something you forgot later.

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| ✓ Computer | ✓ Calculator | ✓ Textbook(s) |
| ✓ Solutions Manuals | ✓ Class Notes | ✓ Study Guide(s) |
| ✓ Blank paper for notes | ✓ Index Cards for Grouping & Repetition | ✓ Multicolored pens |
| ✓ Multicolored highlighters | ✓ Post-It Notes Sticky Flags | ✓ Tape Recorder |
| ✓ Water | ✓ Energy Drinks | ✓ Sodas or Coffee |
| ✓ Snacks – low on sugar (i.e. fruits & veggies) | | Note: <i>Not so much caffeine that it interferes with your planned sleep.</i> |

STEP TWO: IDENTIFY THE STUDY TECHNIQUES THAT WILL MAXIMIZE YOUR LEARNING

The study techniques that you should use depend in part on your learning style(s) and the type of test you are planning on taking. Review these study techniques and select the one or two that are the best fit for your learning style and the type of test you are cramming for.

USING NOTES: Hopefully, you have notes from your class. If not, consider making a copy of someone else's notes – preferably someone who takes good notes. If the professor made a specific point of emphasizing specific subject matter in class, it's likely that at least some of this subject matter will appear on the exam.

A few ways to use your notes to your advantage:

- Look through the notes and try to find things that have been underlined or highlighted in some other way. This information is probably important.
- Scan the notes and look for key information that you can highlight or flag with Post-it notes for easy reference later on.
- Rewrite key information from your notes. This will help you memorize and comprehend important points.
- Record the most important parts of your notes and replay them later.

USING THE TEXTBOOK: Reading an entire textbook is not an effective way to cram for an exam. Instead, concentrate on the summaries that appear at the beginning and end of each chapter. Chapter end questions, illustrative examples and other synopses designed to clarify a section of content may also prove helpful.

A few other techniques to try include:

- Looking for bolded words. Words in a bold or italicized font are probably important. Take note of these words by writing them down, highlighting them or flagging them in some other way.
- Knowing how to answer chapter end questions. While only a few professors may pull their exam questions straight from the back of the book, these questions still reflect what the authors considered to be the most critical information presented in their textbook. In lieu of anything contrary from your notes, this is a good source of important material to know for the exam.

- Using the table of contents, the glossary and other overlooked parts of the textbook to get an overview of key information.
- Reading introductions and conclusions. These parts of the text always include important points.

USING CONDENSED NOTES AND STUDY GUIDES: Reading or re-reading a book overnight is no easy feat. You may want to consider using *Cliffs Notes* or other types of study guides. These materials usually include plot summaries, character information and step-by-step instructions to help you get through it all. It's not a perfect trade-off, but when you're in a crunch it works.

USING OTHER STUDY MATERIALS: Some professors are kind enough to hand out study materials prior to an exam. If your professor does that, you should use what you are given. The information within these materials will almost certainly be woven into the exam.

Other study materials you may be able to use:

- Workbooks or Student Manuals - A lot of college textbooks have accompanying student manuals or workbooks that contain sample essays or quizzes. Again, these reflect what the authors and your professor, by choosing that textbook, consider to be important.
- Past Assignments, Tests and Quizzes - A good way to review for an exam is to focus on what you've already been tested on. You can do this by pulling out any past assignments, tests or quizzes that include the subject you're currently studying.

USING A TAPE RECORDER OR MP³ PLAYER: By recording information from your notes or textbook that you believe to be important, you can reinforce your learning while you're involved in other tasks. When you hear something over and over again, it's bound to sink in just a little bit. If you decide to use this steady technique, you can replay what you recorded:

- While you sleep. (Can't hurt, right?)
- While you're brushing your teeth and getting ready to go in the morning.
- While you eat breakfast.
- While you travel to class or the exam center.
- While you wait for the exam to be handed out.

USING MEMORIZATION TECHNIQUES: There are tons of different memorization techniques that you can use to cram for an exam. A few of the best include:

- Repeating information over and over again. (Do this until you can easily repeat something ten minutes later.)
- Rewriting information that you want to retain. (Rewrite at least three times for maximum retention.)
- Acting it out. (Make up a dance or hand signals to remember whole sentences.)
- Making rhymes and songs out of important dates and facts. (Who can forget that in 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue?)
- Using acronyms to remember facts. (SIM translates to Sedimentary, Igneous and Metamorphic - the three basic rock types.)

- Using acrostics to remember words in a specific order. (**M**y **D**ear **A**unt **S**ally = **M**ultiply and **D**ivide before you **A**dd and **S**ubtract)

QUIZZING YOURSELF: You should assess how well you are retaining the information you are studying mid-way through your cram session. If you are not retaining information with the technique you are using, you still have time to switch to a different one that will work better for you. A few ways to check your retention include:

- Use a voice recorder or MP³ Player with pre-recorded questions.
- Use index cards that have questions written on one side and answers on the other.
- Use chapter-end questions from your textbook.
- Use questions from past quizzes, tests or assignments.
- Ask someone else to quiz you.

BONUS STUDY TECHNIQUES

Here are a few exam-specific techniques that might help you through your cram session:

ESSAY EXAMS: Essay exams, whether short-answer or multiple pages, are unique and require a different study approach than other exam questions. You should consider memorizing a few important points for each topic you may be tested on. Once you know the basics you should be able to elaborate on those points to answer the average essay question.

You may want to brush up on your approach to writing an essay exam before the test. See *Answering the Essay/Short Answer Exam Question* on the E. L. C. Resources Tab.

MULTIPLE CHOICE EXAMS: Trying to pass your exam by selecting 'B' as the answer to every multiple choice question is destined to end in failure. A better approach would be to modify how you study for these types of questions:

- ❶ Focus on details (flash cards, word lists, definitions, etc.). Remember, the multiple choice question always focuses on details.
- ❷ Memorize vocabulary words and definitions. Multiple choice exams test your knowledge of a concept through your understanding of and ability to apply the vocabulary of that concept or discipline.
- ❸ Make sure you understand multi-step processes and sequences of events. Multiple choice exams usually include questions which demonstrate your understanding of similarities and differences.

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