

Preparing for and Taking Exams

Well Begun is Half Done

Some of the points below may be new to you. See how many describe your habits, and see how many you would like to explore further. There will be a discussion of each point below the list.

1. I basically prepare for exams from the first day of class:
 - ❖ By reviewing my notes at the end of the day
 - ❖ By actively reading all of the text assignments
 - ❖ By making sure I ask questions about any material I do not understand
2. I attend each class.
3. I am always on time for class.
4. Before an exam, I assemble all of my class materials and create summaries of what I have learned.
5. The night before the exam I get a good night's sleep.
6. The day of the exam, I eat a good breakfast.
7. The day of the exam, I come to class a few minutes early so I am settled in mind and body by the time the test begins.
8. I read the directions and questions thoroughly before I begin the test.
9. I answer the easiest questions first.
10. I read every question all the way through before I answer it.
11. If I see a question that is really difficult, I stop and ask myself, "OK, why is this question on the test? How does it fit into the context of the course?"
12. For essay questions, I make a quick outline or diagram before I start writing.

Discussion

All of the points above relate to preparing for and taking exams with the least amount of stress. There will be a basic consistency in the related advice below: **for preparation:** staying active in the learning process all the way through the course, staying rested; **for taking the exam:** coming early, doing the easiest parts first, being aware of the context of each question, taking a moment to think through answers to harder or longer questions.

Why Stay Active from Day One?

Active learning involves taking usable notes so we are able to self-test ourselves regularly and making a commitment right from the start, not only to read text

assignments, but also to actively integrate the information gained into our class materials so it is easily retrievable. From time to time what we hear in class or read outside of class will contain material that we do not understand. We don't sweep this under the carpet and hope for the best; we ask questions in the class in which they come up, or in the next class after the reading assignment. Keeping track of the answers to our questions adds valuable information to the materials we are accumulating for quizzes and exams. As we move toward understanding the material and actually start to own it, we are actively preparing for a more enjoyable experience of expressing knowledge when we are tested.

Why Attend Each Class and Be on Time?

A lot is packed into university classes. If we miss the beginning of a lecture or a whole class, we put ourselves behind the rest of the class. Our classmates have their own schedules to keep; it is hard to find someone willing to catch us up. Being self-sufficient is an important part of active learning. Responsibly attending each class and being on time 1.) contributes to the all-over coherence of the class and 2.) averts the danger of creating a harried situation for ourselves when it is time to be tested. Both situations are equally important. The idea of coherence in the classroom is either unknown or strongly underrated at most other universities. At Maharishi University of Management it is one of the most important things we can do for individual academic success.

What does it Mean to Contribute to the All-over Coherence of the Class?

Every group has its own dynamics. If everyone stays on the same page, it can actually help everyone in the group be more successful. Discussions are more useful and satisfying, and learning becomes more interesting and enjoyable. Maintaining coherence doesn't mean everyone agrees all the time; it means that everyone in the class respects the conditions that promote active learning.

The Organizing Power of Active Learning

If we have been actively organizing material during the whole course, when it comes time to study, it is just a matter of assembling our notes, readings, and any relevant points in the syllabus, noting how we have self-tested ourselves previously, and writing summaries or drawing diagrams of the material. We think to ourselves: "If I were the professor, what questions would I ask?" Then we answer them during the final study time. Some people are more verbal and they benefit from writing summaries; some more visual, and they benefit from drawing diagrams. However, if we draw diagrams it is

important to also practice writing answers, because in most cases that will be the mode of expression on the test.

Taking Good Care of Ourselves

It is a common misunderstanding that in order to succeed we need to struggle. The reality is that in order to succeed, one must be healthy, alert and inwardly calm. If we get a good night's sleep, eat a good breakfast in the morning, come to class a little bit early so we are settled in mind and body, we have set up initial conditions for clear minded test taking.

The Survey-Organize Technique Works Well for Taking Exams

Survey the whole test first. In order to plan your time for taking the test, it is good to read through it and note the easier parts and those that will be more challenging. We can even mark in the margin target time frames for answering each section. We can also mark the easiest questions, and we can answer them first. As we start to answer, it's good to recheck the directions at the beginning of the section. We stay organized by reading a question very carefully before we answer it. There is nothing worse than writing a beautiful answer that does not apply to what is being asked. (Well, there are worse things; but on a scale of 1–10, that one is a minus 46.)

If there is a question that seems very difficult, we ask ourselves why it is on the exam. How does it fit into the context of the course? Why does the teacher expect us to know it? This will help us to think more actively about the question and the answer may come. Even if we are still not sure, it is good to write something, but not to “fudge” it. That means we don't just say anything that pops into our head; we will not get any credit for something like that. We take an intelligent, educated guess.

For essay questions, well begun is half done. We plan out our answer with either an outline or a diagram. If we are not allowed to have any other paper on the desk, we can do it on the back of the question sheet. If we start with wholeness, the parts will come more easily.

Self-testing on the contents of this lesson on Preparing for and Taking Exams is good practice. Scan for main ideas and summarize what you have learned.

Good luck on your next exam!

Maharishi University of Management Academic Support Center

We'd love to hear from you. Let us know about your experiences using the advice in this section.

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