THE McGRAW CENTER for TEACHING & LEARNING
328 Frist Campus Center
Princeton University, Princeton, NJ

What Can I Do NOW to Prepare Myself for Dean's Date and Final Exams

Princeton's compressed semester and relatively little class time makes the lead up to finals even more intense here than in other places. Given projects and written work, there simply isn't enough time at the end of the term to do all the studying you need to do well on finals.

Additionally, final exams are unique in a number of ways that make them even more challenging. First, they are often cumulative, requiring students to synthesize and apply content from multiple sources covered at various points in the term. They also tax your retention and recall; you'll likely be expected to retain some information for more than a dozen weeks and apply your knowledge quickly and accurately in those three hours.

One way to meet these challenges is to strategize about simple, time-efficient measures you can take as the semester unfolds. If you try out a sampling of the techniques below, I think you'll be surprised at how much impact these small tweaks to your academic approach can make to your stress levels—and performance—at Dean's Date and during final exams.

Class notes: Class lectures and discussions at Princeton are usually the "backbone" of the course serving to unify big chunks of information and advance the main organizing ideas or argument of the course. So, taking effective notes and putting them to use is an indispensable part of being efficient.

- Review your notes in the small chunks of time when doing a reading or writing assignment or problem set isn't viable. This activity keeps you "connected" to the course and somewhat up to date even if you fall behind on readings, and often makes doing the readings or completing problem-sets more time efficient.
- Take class notes in ways that make subsequent study easier and faster. Leave lots of open space where you can later clarify and comment on your notes. Integrate class notes with notes from readings (or other sources) by, for instance, dividing up your paper (or word document) into two columns and taking lecture notes in one and corresponding notes from readings, precept or what have you in the other, emphasizing the overlap and connections.

Reading: You can't make the most of what Princeton courses have to offer and truly excel if you don't engage the readings. Many courses at Princeton include truly incredible reading lists. Incredible in their quality but also in terms of quantity. These techniques will help you manage the amount of reading and help you get more out of them and retain what you've learned better.

- It's easy to get into an "all or nothing" mindset when it comes to doing readings. Some students think of the reading for a course as one big assignment and do it or don't. But, often there are multiple readings assigned, and even a textbook chapter can be thought of in terms of (more or less) relevant subsections which can be divided up. Additionally, when reading non-fiction material, I suggest you think of reading in "layers" or depths. Thinking of your assigned texts as one undifferentiated assignment all of which must be read at a deep level is daunting and can be a barrier to getting started. Instead, start by reading at the top or "surface" level of ALL the texts and then make decisions about which texts you'll read in greater depth and at what layer (see below).
- Do a "surface" level reading of the entire text scanning titles, headings, charts, pictures, etc. (or first sentences of paragraphs) looking for the main argument of the text or organizing ideas AND for ways the text connects to that week's topic and course themes. Circle and underline key terms or phrases, and maybe make a note or two, but keep this quick. Once you've surveyed all the reading, decide on which texts or sections warrant a more focused, comprehensive reading. This is what most people envision when they think of "reading;" taking in all of the text in order and jotting down notes, underlining, etc. The third, deepest level, is close analytical reading of passages which are unclear to you, crucial to the text and course, or which include particular language (e.g. terms and phrases) that you feel need to be examined. Employ deep reading selectively; it's typically not possible to read all of the assigned text in this way, nor is it expected.

- To make end-of-semester studying more efficient, write brief 2-3 sentence summaries of readings. Even better, immediately after reading a text write a couple of sentences that link the text to other texts assigned that week, the week's topic, or an organizing theme for the course. This kind of thinking is what exams call for much more than mere summaries. Writing these kinds of course-specific syntheses not only get you thinking about the big picture of the course, you get practice producing your ideas in ways similar to what you'll be asked to do on exams.

Getting More out of problem sets: Problem sets are where students are expected to learn how to apply what they learn in class to solve problems. These are best thought of as instructional or learning activities for students, not merely "assignments" to get points. Since you often get relatively few problems assigned, the question arises of how to get the most learning and practice from problem sets.

- Treat problem-sets like an exam or quiz. Prepare for them and then work through the problems (or a subset of them) under exam conditions—timed, no external materials. In this way, you are simultaneously completing problem sets and practicing for quizzes and exams.
- After you complete a problem. Take a moment to jot down in your notes answers to a few questions: What did you learn--concepts, techniques, short-cuts, etc.—from working the problem that you want to remember? Can you imagine how the same concepts or problem-solving techniques or procedures might be used and tested in other ways? What are the limits of or exceptions to what you learned; that is under what circumstances would these techniques or concepts NOT be useful?

Capturing and organizing what you are learning as you go (i.e. creating study tools): Keeping the "big picture" of the course in mind as you go is crucial to selecting, organizing, and integrating the large volume of information typically assigned. Having some sort of "database"—a chart, table, or even list that can grow as you are introduced to new material is a great way to capture the most important knowledge in the course while putting it into a format that will be easy to use during reading week.

- Create your own course "study guide". Create a word document (or excel file, or good old-fashioned paper) with three columns. Use the sequence in which the material is presented in class to organize the sequence of items in your study guide. Put the key terms or phrases (from class, readings, p-sets) in the left-most column. In the middle column, organize and paste crucial information. For instance, definitions of a term, an example, counter-examples, and even an explanation of its significance. In the third column add any other notes, such as memory aids, ways you might apply the concept and connections to other key terms in your study guide. Prioritizing, selecting and organizing the information into the guide is a kind of effective studying and you create a super-efficient study tool all ready for use during reading week.
- Make a course-specific study tool. Every course can be thought of (somewhat simplistically) as being organized around a series of topics, about which students are expected to learn several different "types" of knowledge. Starting with these types or categories in mind and using them to select and (re-)organize information from the class is a great way to manage large amounts of information efficiently. To create a useful chart for a course, start by identifying the main topics in the class (usually found in the syllabus) and plug them into a word document table or excel file (one per row). To figure out the types of knowledge that will organize the columns, ask yourself what your professor expects you to learn about each topic and what additional information would be personally useful as an aid to learning/memory. These might be the main themes in a course, such as the technological, political, social and cultural changes during various time periods in a history course. In a math course, the categories might be something like the following: Key terms, definitions or theorems, relevant formula, illustrative diagram, sample problem, ways/techniques for solving these types of problems, shortcuts and trapdoors (limitations), and anything else that would be of help. For each topic, enter the relevant type of information (main ideas only, or it gets too confusing) into the appropriate box. You can use this to identify gaps in your knowledge, unnoticed similarities and patterns across topics, and to study the conceptual content of the course in an efficient manner.

Research papers: Many courses assign end-of-semester research papers. The purpose of them is for students to synthesize ideas and materials from the course and extend or elaborate on them. They can be extremely time-consuming if left entirely to the end of the term when you'll be expected to keep up with the course readings, lectures, etc.

- Create a file specifically for the purpose of collecting ideas, references, materials, etc. for your final project. When you get an idea, write a few sentences and put it in the file. These might be prompted by or come directly from readings, lecture notes, office hours or even stuff you see in the news or surfing the web.