

Analyzing Returned Exams to Prepare for Final Exams

Past final exams and returned midterm exams/projects/papers from the course are probably the most reliable indicators of what final exam questions/assignments will look like. Use these resources to predict the types of questions (i.e. analysis, synthesis, application, etc.) you are likely to be given and plan your process for preparing to respond to them.

Use any returned exams/papers to look for patterns in the types of thinking required by the questions asked. Consider reworking your errors on midterms/problem sets to see why you made the mistakes you did. Try to determine if this is a kind of error you made regularly, and think about how you might go about remedying it. Similarly, try to reason out why the correct answer was correct. If you do not receive your test back, visit your instructor's office to examine your answer sheet and the questions you missed. The purpose of this activity is not to get the correct answer to any particular problems, but rather to get a deeper insight into how to solve problems of the type your instructor expects. *So, don't focus merely on the answer, analyze why a particular question was asked and how to solve that TYPE of problem or write an appropriate answer to that type of question.*

1. **Identify the reason you missed a question.** Did you fail to interpret it correctly? Did you fail to prepare for it? Was the test at a more difficult (or simply different) level than you prepared for? Did you run out of time? Did it not even occur to you that you would be tested in this way? Brainstorm solutions to address any and all of the reasons why you missed a question.
2. **Consider the level of detail and skill of the test/assignment.** Were most of the questions on precise details and facts or were they over main ideas and principles? Did they require evaluation, synthesis or analysis in addition to application, comprehension and recognition? Were the questions on material that comes straight from the text, or did the test writer expect you to make sophisticated transformations and analyses? Adjust your exam preparation methods accordingly.
3. **Review the procedures you used to study, prepare and complete problem-sets or other assignments.** What did you do that was effective/wasn't effective? What can you do differently in preparation for the final exam/project? If you don't receive complete feedback as to what you did ineffectively, ask your preceptor or instructor for feedback and their recommendation on how you can go about not only solving problems/doing these kinds of tasks, but also for tips on how to prepare. Remember, though, that while your instructors are experts in their subject matter, they are typically not experts about learning, so evaluate their advice before choosing to follow it or not.
4. **Adapt your approach to the course as a result of your analysis.** Taking what you've learned from your own analysis and from your conversations with your instructor, preceptor, classmates, etc., determine which study strategies will best prepare you for the final. Consider not only how you will study, but in what order you will address different tasks, and how much time you will devote to various methods. Be aware that the objectives of different parts of a course can vary considerably, and so exams on them can also. Final exams may emphasize application, analysis and synthesis more than initial exams as those course objectives become more important in latter portions of the course. Finals are also frequently cumulative, testing a wider range of knowledge, some of which may have been presented months previously. Often, instructors expect students to synthesize large amounts of information for the exam. More demanding questions can be asked in the longer time frame allotted to final exams. Think about how these questions are not just "harder" but qualitatively different than midterm exam questions.

Note: This document is an adaptation of an un-attributed resource on test-taking.