

This document lays out a comprehensive strategic approach to final exam preparation. Because it is based upon fundamental principles of learning, much of this guidance is applicable to final papers, projects, and other culminating course assessments. The McGraw Center [Resources](#) Page includes many other relevant materials on [time and task management](#), efficiency/[productivity](#), learning from [returned exams](#), the vital role of [practice](#), and other advice for [managing Dean's Date assignments and Finals Period](#). We also offer one-page handouts on activities you can undertake now to [get ready](#) for the end of term and balancing [independent work](#) demands with course work, among other relevant topics, such as overcoming [procrastination](#).

Think of an exam as a performance:

Think of an exam as a performance and exam prep as including rehearsal or a scrimmage—**authentic practice**. If you approached preparing for exams as you do a play, musical performance, athletic or forensic competition or similar event, how would your preparation be different? In academic learning, most people emphasize 'taking in' information, and under-emphasize practicing demonstrating their knowledge by applying it. We would never go on stage having only 'learned' the words of the script or committed the music to memory, we would have practiced our performance multiple times, working out the rough spots, focusing on the difficult parts and striving for fluency and fluidity. To more effectively use your time, deepen your learning, and achieve at higher levels, include not only review and study, but also authentic practice of the tasks you will be expected to perform on your final exercise, whether it be an exam, presentation, or paper (e.g. compose a draft).

Come up with a game plan:

- Develop a **realistic study schedule** based upon clear and specific goals for each session. Write down where you'll study, at what time, and exactly what you intend to do with that time. Note: don't plan to cram—studies show that cramming leads to higher stress and lower scores. Think in terms of a five-day plan for each course.
- **Determine** available study time, blocks of time for specific tasks, and study with a sense of urgency. Schedule sleep, meals, and (some) down time. Sleep deprivation reduces efficiency.
- **Organize** your study area and materials, and make necessary plans (e.g., with study group members). [Create conditions conducive to engagement](#) (see the fourth bullet) and learning when studying remotely.

Think like a professor:

- **Grasp** the big picture of the courses and your professor's objectives.
- Identify the underlying logic of the course design by focusing on **main principles, themes, and concepts first**, then look for evidence (details, examples) supporting and explaining them.
- Pay particular attention to **concepts** professors focused upon in class or in homework, quizzes, problem sets, and other assignments—and strive to **connect** them into a coherent understanding.

Predict exam questions from the course syllabus, your lecture notes, problem sets, precept discussions, and readings:

- **Formulate central questions** that link large chunks of course material. They will usually be derived from main principles and concepts—including how various concepts relate to each other—and can often be found in the course syllabus. Practice answering them.
- **Identify and classify information** that might show up in an identification or short-answer section. Prepare yourself to show what you know succinctly.

Consider where your weaknesses lie:

- What concepts remain unclear? Which problems do you routinely struggle to solve? **Targeting your studying** will help you make the most of the time you have for each course.
- Evaluate not merely whether you "know" the material, but whether you have mastered it and can flexibly **apply your knowledge** in ways your professor will expect of you.

Create study aids such as:

- **Reading summaries** that capture main points of texts and relate them to course themes.
- **Charts** of theorems, mechanisms, or principles rewritten in your own words.
- A **course study guide** or "cheat sheet" that organizes main concepts, includes explanation and examples, and is easy to review.
- **Problem packets** in which you collate similar problems from the course and their solutions to identify patterns and effective problem-solving techniques.

For quantitative courses, work through problems:

- Work through previous assignments, the ends of textbook chapters, or old exams to build intuition and gain familiarity with novel, **exam-level problems**.
- Don't think of each problem as unique; instead, look for **similarities** among them and **common techniques** for solving them.
- Don't consult the answer key until you've tried to solve the problem yourself--work under **test-like conditions** whenever possible.
- Review your cheat sheet to solidify conceptual understanding; practice reproducing it from memory.

For essay exams, practice writing your response:

- Predict questions and **outline** your answers in preparation for the exam.
- Identify specific **examples/evidence** you will use to support your main points.
- If the exam is in class, **time your practice runs** to get a sense of the depth/quality of essays you'll be able to produce in the time allotted.
- **Evaluate** your practice efforts (outlines/drafts) and consider how to refine your response; review relevant lectures and readings to fill gaps.
- **Practice** producing your answers or outlines, not merely reviewing material.

Try to explain difficult material to someone else:

- You can do this with a study partner or in **study groups**. You can also work with peers to generate questions, exchange study strategies, and motivation/accountability.
- **Explain course content** to someone NOT in the course, such as a family member or friend. This ensures you truly understand conceptually and not merely parroting terminology.

Take practice exams:

- **Take an old exam** and note what types of skills and techniques are tested--practice these.
- **Time yourself** and use only the materials you will have at the exam; don't refer to "solutions" or a study guide--you won't have them on the actual exam...
- **Review** your answers and **focus your studying** on filling gaps in your skills and knowledge.

Don't be afraid to ask your instructors and AIs for help:

- If after reviewing, you still don't understand something, take advantage of **office hours or review sessions** to ask questions about the material. Because of the **COVID-19 disruption**, find out EARLY if and when these will be held and plan accordingly.
- **Clarify the format and features** of the exam as virtual instruction will necessitate atypical final exams. Ask for advice about how to study and prepare for the final.

Meet with a McGraw Learning Consultant:

Make a plan for preparing for Dean's Date and Finals Period and specific exams at the McGraw Center. Our McGraw Learning Strategy Consultants can help you develop a strategic approach to learning and success in all of your courses. **Sign up** for a free appointment, attend a **workshop**, and remember to eat well, exercise, and get enough sleep. You'll study and perform better.