

How to Prepare for Examinations

Important principles

- **Use the whole semester to prepare for exams.** The final exam of most courses is worth more than half the total marks for the course, so it is worthwhile investing the time and effort during the semester to get prepared for them.
- **Make sure you are clear about what you are expected to know and be able to do in your courses.** You can more or less bet that your exams will assess these.
- **Practise thinking, solving, writing – what you will need to do in your exams!** Whether it is to solve a particular kind of problem, draw the mechanisms involved in a particular procedure, or explain the ins and outs of a particular theory – you need to practise being able to do these so that you will be able to do them easily when you get to your exams.
- **Work hard and consistently to get good coursework marks.** Your final mark for each course, which determines whether you pass or fail it, is in most cases a combination of your coursework and final exam marks. Thus, the marks you get in assignments and other coursework during the semester are crucial – not only in getting a good final mark, but also in alleviating pressure and stress you may experience about your final exams.

What to do if you are reading this during the semester (ZERO or LOW levels of desperation)

- **Regularly attend lectures, tutorials, labs, and other instruction sessions provided in your courses.** These provide you with good opportunities to learn from your instructors, and to get a sense of what they consider to be important in the courses you are taking.
- **Make sure you are absolutely clear about the learning objectives and outcomes for each of your courses.** Find out what these are – for each course as a whole and for each lecture or section of each course (where these are specified).
- **As the semester progresses, check your knowledge and skills development against these learning objectives and outcomes.** Ask yourself questions like: Can I do this now? Can I explain this without looking at my book or my notes? Can I reliably solve these kinds of problems?
- **Regularly revise and keep up with your course materials – including readings and the like.** However, do this work in light of the learning objectives and outcomes of your courses. Hence, for example, find out what you are supposed to understand and be able to do in a particular section of the course prior to reading the corresponding chapter in the textbook.
- **Test your knowledge and skills development against past exam questions.** As you complete the different sections of your courses and study/revise the materials for these accordingly, have a go at answering the appropriate questions from past exams. Find out what you can and cannot do,

and adjust your study tasks accordingly. You can also use questions and problems from textbooks, assignments, and tests to practise on.

- **Ask questions and seek advice when you need to.** There will always be instances when you would get stuck – not quite understanding something despite trying to, or not quite able to solve something despite numerous attempts at it. In such cases, it is important that you approach your lecturers and/or tutors for clarification, help and/or advice. Do not just hope that you will not get asked a question on it in the exams!

What to do if you are reading this very close to your exams (MAXIMUM or HIGH levels of desperation)

- **Do a quick audit of each of the courses for which you will be sitting exams.** Find out what you will be expected to know and be able to do for each exam. Find out and list what you currently know and do not know, can and cannot do.
- **For each course, start by quickly revising all of those you already know and can do.** This way, you can make sure that you definitely will be able to answer questions on these in your exams.
- **Systematically work through the topics and course sections under the category of “do-not-know or cannot-do”.** You may not be able to get through all of them, but your aim should be to get through as many of them before each exam.
- **Focus on doing exam prep activities that will enable you to meet the requirements of your exams.** Ask questions like: Will I need to explain this? (If so, practise explaining it without looking at your notes.) Will I need to solve problems like this? (If so, practise solving similar problems without relying on notes or model answers you will not have in the exams.) Will I need to remember the different names and functions depicted on this diagram? (If so, photocopy the diagram, twink out the names and function, and practise remembering those correctly.)
- **Learn from this experience.** And try be better organised and well prepared for future exams.