

10 Common Mistakes Students Make When Studying for Exams



Final exams can have a major impact on students’ overall grades!

It’s not uncommon for a final exam to be worth 30 or 40% of the overall grade for a course. Often, this one test has as much of an impact on students’ grades as ALL of the homework assignments they have completed throughout the entire semester…combined!

Unfortunately, most students have never learned how to study effectively for exams.  And the methods they *think* are effective are actually not as useful as they believe.  Studies suggest that most college undergraduates have a poor understanding of which study tactics are most effective, and routinely prepare for tests using inefficient learning strategies (Karpicke & Blunt 2011; McCabe 2011)

**Here are 10 common mistakes students make when studying for exams:**

1. **Not knowing the grades you’re aiming for**
If you don’t know what score you need to earn on each of your final exams in order to get the grades you want in your classes, how can you know which exams are most important to study for? Yes, in an ideal world, you would study everything for every class, and get 100%’s on all of your exams. But in reality, you have a limited amount of time to work with, so it makes sense to spend more time studying for the classes in which your grade on the exam is more important — either because it is worth more of your overall grade, or because you need a good score on the exam in order to pull up your average to the grade you want.
2. **Relying on your teachers to prepare you**
Many students assume that they will be prepared for the test as long as they go to class, attend the teachers’ exam review sessions, and look over the study guides teachers have handed out. The materials your teacher provides are a great clue about what they think is important to know for the exam, so they can be a great starting place, but just being present for the review sessions and looking over the study guide is not enough to guarantee that you will do well on the exam. If you really want to do well, YOU need to take responsibility for ensuring that you truly understand the material.
3. **Not starting early enough**While many students intend to begin studying for final exams a couple of weeks beforehand, that timeline often slips as exams approach. After several days of convincing yourself it will be OK to skip this one day and get started tomorrow, suddenly what was supposed to be a week of studying turns into one or two frantic nights of cramming. Studying for exams often takes more time then you might anticipate, so make sure you get started early!
4. **Studying in chronological rather than priority order**One common approach to studying for exams is to sit down and look through all of the notes from class in chronological order. In addition to being a very passive study strategy (more on this below), it also puts you at risk of running out of time to review the material you learned most recently, which is often emphasized more heavily on the final exam. Instead of studying in chronological order, try studying in priority order, spending the majority of your time on the information that will be most important for you to know for the test.
5. **Using passive study strategies**
The most common study method most students use is reading over their notes from class. Unfortunately, this approach to studying is not very effective, in large part because it is extremely passive. I’ve found that students who use this approach will readily admit that they can read over a page of notes and not remember what they have just read! If you don’t remember it right after you’ve read it, how could you possibly hope to answer questions about it on the test? Choosing more active study strategies that require you to engage with the material will enable you to learn the material more effectively and efficiently.
6. **Not testing themselves on the material**Practice testing (what researchers call “active recall”) is the most effective way for students to prepare for tests. Numerous studies have shown that students who test themselves on the material they are learning remember the information better than students who do not take practice tests. Practice testing also helps students avoid “illusions of competence”: situations in which they think they know the information better than they do. Unfortunately, many students spend much more time reviewing their notes than they do taking practice tests. I strongly recommend testing yourself on the information you’re studying as frequently as possible, both to enhance your memory and to confirm that you have actually learned it.
7. **Practicing in the wrong format** *(not how you’ll be tested)*I often find that students will study the same way for all of their exams, regardless of the format. For example, they might study for history by making flashcards for all the key terms in their notes. This might be a great strategy for a test that is mostly multiple choice and matching questions…but it could get you intro trouble if your test is mostly short answer and essay questions that require you to answer “why” and “how” questions about the bigger-picture concepts from the class. If you want to be prepared for your exams, you need to make sure that the way you are studying for your test is similar to the way you will actually be tested on the material.
8. **Reviewing information you already know**
Even when students are testing themselves and using active study strategies, they often spend the majority of their time on topics they already know. Doing problems you are familiar with and know how to solve is more comfortable, and gives you a nice boost in your self-confidence. The problem with this approach is that you often end up running out of time to work through the challenging problems that you don’t know how to solve…and those are the ones that you end up missing on the test. Don’t waste your time studying things you already know! Once you’ve confirmed that you understand and can answer questions about a certain concept, check it off your list and move on to something more challenging.
9. **Memorizing, rather than understanding** I frequently see students who have been studying by trying to memorize all of the facts from a class, rather than truly understanding the underlying concepts. Memorizing can work well in some classes, especially in elementary and middle school, but it often backfires in more advanced classes. If you’ve memorized a definition but don’t really understand what it means, then as soon as the information is presented in a slightly different format, or you’re asked to apply it to a new type of problem, you will have no idea how to proceed. Rather than memorizing the information from your classes, use study strategies that encourage you to understand it. Explaining ideas out loud in your own words, or teaching them to someone else, are great examples of study strategies that promote understanding.
10. **Not having a PLAN!**One of the biggest mistakes I see students making is that they will sit down and start studying without really knowing what their priorities are, or what they need to focus on in that study session. This might be the biggest mistake of all, because it affects all of the others! If you don’t know what grades you need to earn, what material is most important for you to study, or how to study it effectively, chances are good that you will either go into the exam unprepared…OR waste a lot of time reviewing unimportant information.

**What do you think?**

Which of these mistakes do you remember making when you were a student? Which of them do you see your kids making?

If you could do one thing to help your kids prepare more effectively for their exams, what would it be?

I hope you enjoyed the article! Please share your comments & questions below…I would love to hear from you!

**Citations:**

McCabe, J. (2011). Metacognitive awareness of learning strategies in undergraduates. *Memory & Cognition*, *39*(3), 462-476.

Karpicke, J. D., & Blunt, J. R. (2011). Retrieval practice produces more learning than elaborative studying with concept mapping. *Science*, *331*(6018), 772-775.