

Zen and the Art of Finals: An approach to taking exams

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What I'm proposing here is exactly what the title says: an *approach* to preparing for the final exam. It's particularly geared to the one for my class, but has information that nobody told me as an undergraduate and will hopefully prove helpful for other classes as well. It's not the only way to successfully deal with exams and won't work for everyone (indeed nothing will since we're all different), but it's how I would go about preparation.

First steps

The first thing about doing anything is getting a handle on exactly what the scope of the project is asking a few simple questions: how much do I need to do? What do I need to know to get it done? How long will it take? I'm sure you could think of similar questions, but the point is to approach exams in a systematic way. That means answering some of the above questions since you are constrained by practical limits, most specifically time and space. Given unlimited time, you could do almost anything. Unfortunately, you don't have unlimited time—for taking or preparing for the exam and for most of you it's far from the only obligation you have.

Understanding the exam

My exams tend to focus on concepts: that is groups of information, how they're related, and what they mean in relationship to other groups of information. Yes, you need to know some facts, but the focus here is less on the specifics of the facts themselves than what they *mean*. So your job here is more one of interpretation and thinking critically than one of rote memorization. Obviously, both are important, but it requires a different approach than a class where the emphasis *is* on committing vast quantities of information to memory and needing to do it right. For instance, mathematics requires you to understand how things work conceptually as well, but if you don't remember necessary formulas (and remember them *exactly*), then you're finished. Having said this, you still need a grasp of key ideas in the class. Being able to express them in your own words and illustrate them with specific examples will do just fine and is actually what I want you to be able to do.

Knowing that, the next step is to take an inventory--and I mean this literally. List all the readings for the course and devise some sort of system for answering 3 questions: 1) What do I know? 2) What do I need to brush up on? 3) What don't I know? Be honest with yourself here. Obviously, you should also make sure you have everything. Re-print or download any of the readings that are missing and gather all the books you need in one place. Do it *now*. Don't wait until later or you might forget.

Study groups: There is a certain amount of prep that can—and has to—be done in class. There is some that you need to do on your own. (Reading the essays and looking up definitions, for example). The last part of the equation is what you do with all the info

you have. You've read everything and paid attention in class, but now what? Students who have met outside of other classes to do further review have told me that this process was very helpful.

Exactly what you do depends on how much time you have and what the rest of the group wants to do, but discussion of difficult parts of essays, brainstorming examples for practice essay questions, and writing practice essays are all possibilities. Finding good working definitions of key concepts/ideas is another thing well suited to a study group. This approach has several advantages. First, it forces you to actually spend some concentrated time thinking through the readings for the exam. Second, it allows you to split up the work somewhat: each person in the group can, for instance, tackle a different question and report back to the group. Another helpful exercise is to share notes: really motivated study groups can come up with a master set of notes. At the least, you can make sure everyone has notes from classes they missed. The big advantage of study groups is that they multiply the brainpower of everyone involved. In short, a few hours spent on one or two weekends before the final can have a big payoff.

Preparation

After doing your inventory, I'd suggest working backwards from your notes (which are hopefully good) and again doing triage of what you know/don't know and using them to point you back to readings you either didn't get to or need a refresher on. Again, I'd do this systematically. There are very few things that you'll have time (or need) to completely re-read, but going back to key parts can be done relatively quickly and you may be able to pick out critical parts of the readings to focus on. Needless to say, this is especially important with the books (which hopefully you own and marked with post-it notes/ highlighter /pencil the first time around) since you really do not have time to re-read them.

Don't forget your weekly response papers. Quickly reviewing your answers is another way to refresh your memory of key points, especially if you did them well. Use response papers and notes to point you toward *parts* of books that you might want to read again. Poems are short enough that they *can* be re-read/ re-watched and here is where you might want to do some memorization of key things: at least the proper title and names of poets you feel you would want to write about. This is the exception to my rule against rote memorization: you should know the name of the writer and title of what you're writing about.

The exam itself

The format will be 3 long essays. It will be cumulative (meaning that technically anything from the readings/ in-class viewing, etc. is fair game). Obviously, given the format I can't ask you everything and aren't really interested in whether or not you have total recall of every obscure fact anyway. However, what the format means is that the more *concepts* from the course you understand and the more readings you remember the

key points of, the more flexibility you'll have in answering questions and you'll have a better chance of being able to pull out exactly the right point.

Logistics

The test will be mid-morning, though will start earlier than normal class time. Keep this in mind if you are not a morning person or have work/ childcare/ family commitments. *Plan to be early:* you'll need (and want) all 2 hours for the test. The way Murphy's Law works, that day will be the one day the train will be jacked up, the bus will take forever to get there, your car will have a flat tire, etc. While you can't anticipate everything, if you can eliminate the mental stress of having to rush, you'll be more relaxed and ready to do your best performance. Even if you don't like to eat in the morning (I don't), try to at least have *something* so that halfway through the test your growling stomach doesn't distract you from doing your best. And plan to bring something to drink. It may be hot on test day and keeping hydrated will help keep you sharp.

Taking the test

Begin by quickly scanning the entire test to get an idea of what you need to answer. With this test, you can do that quickly and it allows your brain to start working on other questions before you get to them. Here are a few general tips:

- **Do easy questions first.** Rack up the maximum amount of points by answering the questions you know really well first. You can then tackle the harder stuff.
- **Outline your answers.** Essay questions demand that you efficiently organize and present a lot of information. It's easy to forget things and lose points you shouldn't. Make a quick outline before you begin and keep referring back to it.
- **Organize your answers.** Following on the last point, the key to writing good essays is organization. Go back to Freshman Comp class here and think about what key points you made in your outline. Put those in your intro, fully develop each one in separate paragraphs and put together a nice conclusion to wrap things up and tie everything together.
- **Be thorough.** One trick to good writing of any type is understanding that you need to lead the reader step-by-step through your thought process. A lot of time students tell me "but you *know* what I meant/ everything in the book". Maybe, maybe not, but the point is to make sure you convey your thinking *fully, clearly, and logically*. What I don't know is exactly what your thought process is and that's what you need to communicate.
- **Don't get stuck.** Time is your enemy here. If an answer's not coming to you, skip it for one you know and go back to it later—*but make sure you actually do go back to it!*
- **Watch the time.** I'll suggest a general time breakdown for various parts of the exam and put the time on the Blackboard, but having a watch is essential to keep yourself on track.
- **Answer the question.** I can't stress this enough. On every test, students lose points because they either don't completely understand (or carefully read) the question or

because they leave out parts of the answer. Make sure you answer *all* parts of the question.

- **Guess.** Not that I'm advocating that as a strategy, but if you don't remember something, take a guess or describe the reading/idea as completely as possible. We're talking "Hail Mary pass" strategy here, but it's worth a shot and can sometimes salvage a few points on a question, which is better than none at all. And yes, I do give partial credit.
- **Is that your final answer?** If you've budgeted your time well, you'll probably have a little time left over at the end and be ready to run out the door and start your break. Not so fast. Take the time to do one last quick review of the test, be sure you answered everything (and answered it fully), and that you've done everything you need to. Check to see if there's anything you can add to your answers. Unlike most sporting events, there is no prize for finishing first and no penalty for being the last one out the door.

A few final practical considerations

- You'll have to write a lot in a short period of time. Most of us aren't used to doing a lot of writing anymore since we type almost everything. A gel ink pen with a large diameter barrel takes much less force than a ball point and puts less stress on your hand to hold. That makes a big difference. And bring an extra one: do you want to take the chance that your pen will run out of ink?
- Consider using earplugs to block out the noise. It can be a strange sensation at first, but they allow you to really concentrate once you get used to them. They only cost a couple of dollars, but are totally worth it. I used them for taking exams in graduate school and they helped a lot. I wish I'd known about them sooner.
- Get some rest. Our final is coming at the end of a particularly stressful time when you've probably been getting much less sleep than usual to get everything done. Still, the best thing you can do is be mentally sharp on the day of the test. The all night last-minute cram session is asking for trouble.