

Exam Study Tips for Students in Their First Term

I: Make the Most of Reading Period

Establish a sensible schedule during Reading Period.

Plan your time in advance, day by day. Avoid unproductive distractions (Facebook, the latest meme, “T.W.D.”) and devise healthy rewards for each day’s hard work. If you will have a 9 a.m. exam during finals, it’ll help to get in the habit of rising early (rather than sleeping in until midday), since doing so will make getting up for the exam less of a shock to your system.

Study with a purpose.

Why are you reviewing those notes or that book? How might you be able to apply that knowledge on the exam? Instructors often ask students to synthesize (rather than regurgitate) information on their exams, so it will be useful to think about how a given text or lecture might help you demonstrate your mastery of the course materials. One way to prepare for such exams: try writing brief summaries of major concepts and ideas and converting your lecture notes into small paragraphs explaining key concepts.

Are you studying for a foreign language exam? If so, break down your studying into brief (30- to 45-minutes) intervals over 4-5 days. Cramming a semester’s worth of verb tenses and vocabulary into one 3-hour study period will be unproductive and stressful. Consider writing out verb conjugations *by hand*: studies show that handwriting leads to more efficient memorization.

Reflect on the big picture

Consider each course and its major themes. Review the syllabus to get a sense of the larger purposes and goals of the course. Review your written work and assignments. Consider forming a study group.

Find a study environment that works for you.

Some freshmen study well in their rooms or at a café; others need to be in the residential college library or tucked away in the stacks.

Ask a “study buddy” to keep you motivated and on task.

Encourage one another to keep working for set periods of time, and then take breaks together.

Exercise, and avoid depressants or stimulants (like alcohol and caffeine, respectively) that alter your sleep habits.

II: Respect the Community

Please be reasonably compassionate towards others’ short fuses. Be sensitive to the study needs and stress levels of others. Consider surprising a friend with a small gift or a kind note, and try not to isolate yourself from those who care about you. And go see your dean if you’re worried about a friend.

III: Remain Calm

Get your sleep so that you can think clearly.

Lack of sleep often leads to bad studying and decisions. Have a good nap, talk to your friends or family, or go see your residential college dean for a reality check.

Academic honesty.

Students don't enroll at Yale dreaming of how they will cheat their way through the term. Academic dishonesty most often results from a lack of sleep and stress (which go hand-in-hand); poor time management over a period of many weeks; and blind panic. The harsh penalties for academic dishonesty are not worth it. Professors can and do write strong letters of recommendation for students who have earned Cs in their courses, but will never write for someone whom they suspect of academic dishonesty.

Exams do not measure who you are as a person.

Maintain your perspective, and please keep in mind: one credit is only 1/36th of the minimum requirement for the degree. In the overall scheme of things, then, any given exam is a minor moment in your college experience.

Along those lines, exams may present you with adversity, but they are not "crises." Resist the temptation to shift into a panic mode more appropriate to real disasters.

A restful and well-deserved winter break is almost here, so hang in there. You can do this.