

Tips for Taking In-Class and Closed-Book Exams

IN-CLASS EXAMS

How to prepare: take care of yourself and practice *a lot*.

- The ASP-hosted practice exam sessions are great opportunities to take a practice exam under simulated in-person conditions and under time pressure. Be sure to bring a practice exam!
- You can also simulate exam conditions by taking practice exams around other people, with ear plugs (if that helps you), with only your laptop, etc. The library can be a great place to practice.
- Work up to doing practice questions under time pressure.
 - At first, work through practice questions slowly and “open book” to help you learn the material and develop an effective process.
 - Later do timed practices (and “closed book,” if applicable).
 - View mistakes as opportunities to learn!
- Know what items you may bring to the exam and create a checklist. Pack your bag the night before.
- Get plenty of sleep in the weeks leading up to exams.

Game time! Lean into the moment.

- If you feel some anxiety, that’s normal. Be kind to yourself and acknowledge your feelings – they are a normal reaction to taking an exam.
 - Give your worries a place to hang out while you take the exam. The morning of the exam, spend ten minutes writing down fears and then leave them on the page.
 - Reframe the moment: exams are an opportunity to demonstrate what you’ve learned, not a threat.

- Consider breaking the exam into chunks and giving yourself a certain amount of time for each section. This could be based on the professor's suggested time allocation or on the weight of each question. When you reach the end of each time block, move on *even if you're not done*. It is better to have completed every question imperfectly than only one question perfectly.
- If you find yourself going in circles, pause and take a breath. If you need to, you can leave the exam room briefly (maybe walk around the hall) to refresh yourself.

CLOSED-BOOK EXAMS

- **Start with the big picture.** Spend some time thinking about an overview of the material. This will assist you in placing the cases and principles in context.
- **Use the “scale back” strategy.** One way to create an outline for a closed-book exam is to prepare an outline as you would for an open-book exam and then revise and condense the outline. You can use this strategy to create a short mini-outline or a checklist.
- Use these research-based techniques to learn large amounts of material:
 - **Spacing out learning and review** helps decrease forgetting. If you allow longer periods of time in between study sessions, you'll improve memory.
 - **Interleaving**—mixing subjects up as you study—improves learning. Rather than using a “blocked” practice technique (studying one concept or topic until you feel comfortable and then moving on), interleaving is the mixing of those subjects. Interleaving improves learning because it forces the brain to continually retrieve information. Because interleaving involves retrieval practice, it feels more difficult than “blocked” practice. **Note that it's going to feel like you aren't getting concepts. But while interleaving *feels* worse, it has better long-term results.**
 - Practice way more than you think! If you are wondering whether you should review your notes or do a practice question, do the practice question. **Studies show that self-testing even a single time can be as effective as reviewing information five times.** Don't think of doing practice questions as “testing” yourself or as an indicator of how much you know. **Use practice questions to learn and increase long-term memory.**
- Explore [mind maps](#) and other [memorization techniques](#) for closed-book exams.

- Try [this memorization self-evaluation](#) to help identify opportunities to study more effectively.