

How to Crush Your Finals

By [Amanda J. Carroll](#) | April 23, 2018



The end of the semester is just around the corner, and you're probably already feeling the stress of getting through assignments and projects before finals. Because chemistry and other science courses are cumulative topics, your finals usually will be too—and that can make the pressure feel even worse.

Since final exams can count for a large percentage of your final course grade, or a final exam score can sometimes be used to replace a score from an earlier exam you didn't do as well on, it's important to do all you can to make a good grade. This may seem

overwhelming when there's so much material to cover, but with strategic planning and a concerted studying effort, you have a good chance of rocking your finals.

Here's some advice to get you on your way to a good grade.

Space your studying

The worst thing you can do is wait until the last minute to study for a cumulative final exam, or for any exam for that matter. It is impossible to effectively study an entire semester or year's worth of material in one or two days. Even giving yourself a week can be a challenge. Your brain is much better at absorbing information in short bursts rather than long cramming sessions.

Ideally, you've been reviewing your tests, quizzes, and other graded assignments as you get them back to understand what concepts and knowledge you need to work on. The topics covered in these earlier assessments are the groundwork for your final, so making sure you understand them as you go is the most effective way to ensure you're ready for each next stage.

If you haven't been doing so all along, the best place to start your final exam preparation is by going over past work. Figuring out areas of weakness is half of the battle in studying for finals, and this can help you use your time wisely to focus on material you don't understand as well.

With exams soon approaching, the best thing to do is *keep calm*. Descending into a stress spiral only wastes precious time and brainpower. Look at what material will be covered on the final and make a list of important concepts. Breaking up material into manageable portions will help you to focus on one concept at a time, determine what you're confident in, and figure out what you need to work on. There may not be enough time to completely learn every concept at this point, but you may be able to understand aspects much better, which could boost your performance.

Study smarter, not harder

Science has shown over and over again that simply rereading your notes is just about the single worst way to study. Make better use of your study time by using more active tactics:

- Complete study problems
- Teach to a friend
- Practice with flashcards
- Draw "thought maps" of the concepts you are learning

Study guides and practice tests are great ways to prepare for exams. If you are taking an ACS exam, you can [purchase practice exams and study guides](#). Otherwise, check with your professor or with other students who have already taken the course.

Another helpful tactic is to prioritize things you already have a partial grasp of and try to strengthen your skills and understanding. The good thing about a cumulative final exam over a semester or a yearlong course sequence is that any one topic probably won't be

covered more than any other topic. Generally, each chapter covered on a cumulative final has three to six important concepts. Figure out what these are and make sure you look over each one.

Get info in advance

Before going into finals, find out the test format (multiple choice, free response, etc.), who wrote it (the professor, the department, ACS Exams Institute, etc.), and what information will be provided (periodic table, key equations, constants, etc.). In general, the more information provided on the exam, the more the professor is testing your understanding of the material, rather than your memorization of basic facts, an important clue in where to focus your studying efforts.

It's also a good idea to talk to your professor if you are stuck on anything. Although meeting earlier in the course is better, your professor would much rather you visit last-minute and succeed than struggle alone and fail.

Keep your sanity

As you're grinding through the season of finals, be sure to schedule breaks and some personal time. Even if you can study for eight hours straight, make sure to stop every hour or so for a break—get up, walk around, have a snack, or do something else for about 10-15 minutes to give your brain a rest and reduce your stress level.

And remember that with finals, you're not starting from scratch. If your final covers two semesters of material, you will often find that when you look back over the first-semester material, it isn't as challenging as you remember it. That's because you've been using this knowledge in the second semester (science is cumulative, after all), and you're stronger in it without even realizing it. Gain some perspective by looking back so you can see how far you've come.

Conquering exam day

On exam day, good mental preparation starts with good physical preparation. Get a good night's sleep, do a workout, have a balanced meal, and drink some water. Showing up hungry, dehydrated, or tired will only undermine all the studying you've done (another good reason to avoid all-night cramming sessions).

Don't waste time second-guessing yourself. Instead, bring your confidence on the day of the exam to stay focused on your work.

As you go through the exam, answer all the questions you feel super-confident about to get those easy points. Skip the harder questions you're unsure about and come back to them after you've worked through all the easier questions. Sometimes when you return to the tougher questions, you'll remember more information, or maybe something you see later on in the exam will prompt you to recall knowledge you didn't remember on your first pass-through.

If you are still unsure of the answer or how to work the question, narrow down your options if it's a multiple-choice exam. For free-response questions, try to write something down to get partial credit.

Notes for next year

Staying on top of your understanding all semester is the very best way to rock midterms and finals. When next semester rolls around, you can reduce some of the end-of-semester stress you may be feeling right now by working on assignments, projects, and papers as they are assigned. It's easy to put off a semester project until right before the due date, but if you work on it early, you won't have to rush and try to finish it while also studying for final exams.

If a final exam is cumulative or covers an entire course sequence, begin studying content early in the semester. Set a goal and try to stick with it. For example, consider studying one chapter per week throughout the semester to refresh your mind with information you haven't seen in a while. And be sure to review your test, quizzes, and graded assignments as you get them back. Then you can spend the last few weeks of the semester reviewing the material that you find particularly challenging.

Final exams can be exhausting and stressful, but you can power through them by studying early, using your resources wisely, and creating a plan to make the process much more manageable. Who needs luck when you've got the skills and knowledge (and now strategic tactics) to finish strong?

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