

Ultimately, every student must find his or her own way of preparing for different types of examinations. However, I wish to share with you one way that I have found very effective for the types of exams given in many humanities and social science courses.

I. REMOTE PREPARATION

Class Notes: The main rule of thumb here is: **more is better**. In other words, it is usually better to take more notes than fewer. You can always separate the central from the peripheral points later.

If you can't take neat notes the first time around (what good are they if you can't decipher them at exam time?), copy them as soon as possible into a separate notebook. This has the added advantage of giving you a first review of the material, and letting you catch areas of confusion right away so you can ask about them in the next class session.

Readings: *Never* simply read a text without either highlighting/underlining key points or taking notes on it. Although this means taking longer to do a reading assignment, it's worth it. This method will save you time later on, because it will give you a way of quickly reviewing your reading, rather than trying to re-read everything. This assumes, of course, that you are doing the readings according to the schedule on the course syllabus.

II. IMMEDIATE PREPARATION:

Step One: At least **three days before the exam**, take about an hour (no more!) simply to *read over your notes from the class sessions*. At this point, do not try to study "intensely" (e.g., by trying to memorize things); just read them through. Then do a read-through of the notes you have taken on your readings or of the sections you have highlighted. If you find yourself very confused, consult with your professor—that's what office hours are for!

Step Two: At least **two full days before the exam**, go back over your lecture notes. This time, go through them slowly, taking a few hours if necessary. Use a highlighter to mark important points (definitions, key events, etc.) and use a *separate sheet of paper* to jot down (1) central themes/ideas; and (2) areas where you are weak and will need extra drilling. Then go over the summaries (or highlighted sections) of your readings again, marking central themes and weak points on that separate sheet, which has become your "master outline."

If your professor has given you specific study questions or the exact exam questions, focus your review on these questions, and end the session by writing an outline of answers you'd give to them.

Step Three: On the **night before the exam** (or the morning of, if the exam isn't too early in the day and you have a block of time available), review the "master outline" sheet with central ideas and weak points. Spend extra time on the weak areas if you need to.

If you have specific study questions or the exact exam questions, write out your answers as a kind of "dry run." Then compare your answers with your notes. Spend extra time on the weak areas if you need to.

This method of studying (or any similar multi-step method) is much more effective than "pulling an all-nighter" before the exam. It doesn't take more time; it may even take less. The key element of the method is **repetition**. This is what puts the material into your long-term memory.