

How to Study and Prepare for History Exams

The study of history can be rewarding but also perplexing. History courses require you to read and understand large bodies of detailed information. The history student is expected to perform many tasks: memorize information, study the reasons for change, analyze the accomplishments & failures of various societies, understand new ideas, identify historical periods, pick out broad themes and generalizations in history, and so forth. This guide will make your study easier, assist you in developing good reading habits, increase your retention skills, and help you improve your performance on exams.

Organize Your Study Time

Many students fail to do well in college courses because they do not organize their time effectively. In college, students are generally viewed as adults and are treated as such. They are expected to read the material **before** class, review, and prepare themselves for examinations. Many instructors give only two or three tests during the semester; therefore, assuming **personal responsibility for learning the material is vital**. It is suggested that the student make up a semester calendar to show scheduled test dates and blocks of time to be set aside for study. Then, each week, check the calendar and your course outlines and notes to see what specific preparation is necessary for that week, and plan your time accordingly. Look at all the reading and try to estimate how much time you will need to devote to the material. Set aside a block of time each day for reading your text and studying your lecture notes.

Despite what one may observe on campus, studying is not done most effectively late at night or with background music. Find a quiet, comfortable place to study alone. After you have reviewed the material by yourself, you might find it helpful to go over it with one or more classmates.

Underline or Highlight

Highlighting can be extremely helpful or simply a waste of time in preparing for exams; the key is to be selective in what you highlight. Here are some suggestions:

A. Highlight major concepts, ideas, and conclusions. You will be expected to interpret and analyze the material you have read. In many cases the textbook authors themselves have done this to some degree; so you need to pinpoint their comments as you read. Is the author making a point of interpretation or coming to a conclusion? If so, highlight the key part. Remember, learning to generalize is very important, for it is the process of making history make sense. The historian, like the scientist, not only gathers facts, but also analyzes, synthesizes, and generalizes from that basic information. This is the process of historical interpretation, which you must seek to master. However, it is important to remember that interpretations are valid only when they are based on accurate, comprehensive information. In this process, it is a grave error to approach history with the view of proving or disproving pre-conceived notions. To arrive at valid conclusions, the past must be examined with an open mind. Thoughtful questions must be asked without imposing one's prejudices upon the answers.

B. Highlight Basic Facts. You will be expected to know basic facts (names, events, dates, places) so that you can reconstruct the larger picture and back up your analysis and interpretations. One of the major reasons you are in a history class is to gain a sense of perspective. Only by learning what the pieces are, can we hope to know how they are put together to complete the puzzle.

C. Take Good Lecture Notes. Good notes are organized, readable, clear, and above all reviewable. Generally speaking, you need to use the same rules in listening to a lecture that you use in reading the text. Listen to the instructor, understand what he or she is saying, and then jot down only enough to jog your memory during review. Use abbreviations often. Leave spaces where appropriate and then go back and add to your notes as soon after the lecture as possible. The result should be something of an outline of the professor's lecture. In reviewing your notes, DO NOT wait until the night before an exam to look them over. Review them each day and see how they complement and help you interpret your reading.

D. Work on Your Vocabulary. The course lectures and each chapter in the text will probably include words that you do not know. Some of these will be historical terms or special concepts, words that are not often used in ordinary speech. Others are simply new to you but important for understanding your readings and the lectures. If you cannot determine the meaning a word from the context in which it appears or from its structure, then you will need to use a dictionary. Improving your historical and general vocabulary is an important part of reading history as well as furthering your college career.