The Five Day Test Prep Plan: How to prepare for any exam

**URI101 students: read this handout carefully, then pick a class of your own, and make your own five day plan.**

For most people, preparing for exams in college is a lot more work that it was in high school. Everyone has at least one class in which understanding, memorizing, and doing things with the information you get in class is a real challenge.

Remember – You *can* do it. It’s not a question of talent, it’s a question of know-how. Because teaching in college is different, and the amount of material you have to learn is different, the way you study for exams needs to be different, too. You need to know how!

This guide is going to teach you a few very basic, very important rules for successful studying. It will then explain what a five day test prep plan should look like.

**Getting started: Why some ways of studying work better than others.**

To make a study plan that works, it helps to know three basic things about how you learn:

- *Just like with your body and physical exercise, your brain learns best when you give it lots of short sessions over time, rather just a few long sessions.* No one who’s building muscle strength, for example, would expect their muscles to develop by spending two ten-hour shifts at a gym. Instead, people work out for short sets, over and over again. Same with the brain. To learn something complex, you need to take it piece by piece, for short periods, over many days.

- *All learning requires repetition, and adding new things bit by bit.* People learning to drive a car, for example, usually start in a parking lot. They learn one thing at a time, gradually adding new and more complex things, and at the same time getting lots of repetition on the things that came before. All learning works this way.

- *We learn best when we are doing something.* We learn very poorly just by listening, or just by reading. When you learned to tie your shoes, it helped that someone showed you. But the real learning happened in your brain when you tried it, over and over, yourself. The brain needs to think about what it is doing in order to learn it.

So when you study, you put the three rules together: To learn what you are studying, you need to plan short sessions, revisit the information many times, and add a little bit more each time. This is how your brain works best.

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Before the five days: The “24 Hour Rule”

The five day test prep plan will ask you to take a course you are in and map out a plan for studying that uses these two principles of learning. You will use your syllabus and book to map out what you will cover on each of the five days, dividing the information into small chunks and building knowledge bit by bit with lots of repetition.

Importantly, though, you need to understand that even before the five day period, you should be teaching yourself day by day. Daily work, even just a little bit, makes a huge difference. Another important rule of thumb about learning is the 24 hour rule:

- If you see and think about a new piece of information, and you see and think about it again within 24-48 hours, you can remember it for a long time. If you see it on day one but don’t repeat it shortly after, your brain decides it’s not important and forgets it. So if you see something in class but don’t see it again until just before a test, it’s almost like you never saw it before.

The 24 hour rule Pre Plan:

1. Make notes on what you see and hear in class.

2. Within 24 - 48 hours, read the notes. Look for things that aren’t clear, go into your book, find information to make it clear, and add it to your notes.

3. Repeat 1 and 2. Begin each new time by reading through your old notes, then fix up the most recent ones.

The 24 hour rule Pre-Plan is simple - usually each class can be covered in 30-45 minutes. But it’s also really important! Don’t skip this step. It will make your five day plan so much easier to carry out!

Now, let’s look at what a Five Day Test Prep Plan might look like on paper.
Making a Five Day Test Prep Plan

1. Your syllabus will tell you what chapters are being covered for the test. Break the material into chunks. If the material can be divided neatly by chapter, do that. If not, make up your own chunks based on the structure of the material.

2. Plan to spend about 2 hours studying on each of the five days. It may take less, it may take more. But realistically, there are no shortcuts. Studying is a job. You have to put in the time.

3. During each session, you work on the material in two ways:

   - You add a little more information, one chunk at a time (by making new notes, expanding your notes with information from your materials)
   - You review chunks you’ve already worked on, to get repetition.

Here is an example of what a Five Day test prep Plan might be structured like:

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tuesday</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare</td>
<td>1st chunk</td>
<td>2 hrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wednesday</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review</td>
<td>1st chunk</td>
<td>30 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare</td>
<td>2nd chunk</td>
<td>2 hrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Thursday</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review</td>
<td>1st chunk</td>
<td>15 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review</td>
<td>2nd chunk</td>
<td>30 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare</td>
<td>3rd chunk</td>
<td>1.5 hrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Friday</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review</td>
<td>1st chunk</td>
<td>10 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review</td>
<td>2nd chunk</td>
<td>15 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review</td>
<td>3rd chunk</td>
<td>15 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare</td>
<td>4th chunk</td>
<td>1.5 hrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Saturday</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review</td>
<td>1st chunk</td>
<td>10 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review</td>
<td>2nd chunk</td>
<td>15 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review</td>
<td>3rd chunk</td>
<td>15 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review</td>
<td>4th chunk</td>
<td>15 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self test</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 hr.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Your own five day plan will actually ask you to look through your course material and name specific activities that you will do to prepare. *It is not enough to write “review chapter three; prepare chapter four”*. Your job is to actually plan study activities that you think make sense to learn the material. Here is an example from one student’s plan:

**Sunday**

12:00-1:00 p.m (1 hr)

- Review and highlight notes on Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Morgan  
- Compile summary sheets from lecture and text notes  
- Write questions in the margins of text book

1:15-2:15 p.m (1 hr)

- Recite industrial revolution questions and answers

2:30-3:30 p.m (1 hr)

- Recite railroad questions and answers

Here is another:

**Saturday**

**Review Ch. 14**

1. Go over cards for corporation lists  
2. Self-test on definitions  
3. Review all examples and problems assigned  
4. Review study guide  

**Prepare Ch. 15**

1. Review notes from reading. Re-read highlighted features  
2. Make cards for cash dividends and dividend dates  
3. Make study cards on reasons for issuing stock dividends  
4. Make a definition sheet  
5. Do all the examples and problems assigned  
6. Review study guide

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**Okay, now it’s your turn:** Directions for making your own plan
Now you try it! All you need to do is list one day at a time. Try to stick to the format on page three.

1. Pick a class and use your syllabus to decide what material you must cover.

2. Look through the book, and try to chunk the material into manageable sections.

3. Plan your five days out on paper. Be as specific as you can.

• Remember, your times are going to be approximate.

• You need to also think about what activities will work for you.

• As you think about activities, remember – you learn when your brain is actively doing. The more thought that happens, the more powerful the learning.

• Basic kinds of activities that work best for people include:
  • Building better notes by finding the parts of your book that focus on what your notes focus on, then adding to them.
  • Working on practice problems and review questions.
  • Making your own open book quizzes.
  • Making flash cards and then practicing with them.
  • Talking about what you are learning with other people; teaching to each other.
  • Working on problems together with others.

• Basic activities that people do that tend not to work well include:
  • Reading the book without making notes (not enough thinking).
  • Reading/memorizing slides from class (not enough information).
  • Highlighting the book (not enough thinking).
  • Reviewing your notes without adding to them (not enough thinking).
  • Reviewing problems you’ve already solved (not enough practice).