

LEARNING FROM THE PAST: ANALYZING PREVIOUS EXAMS

Past exams are one of the most reliable indicators of predicting future exams. What to do with Previous Exams:

STEP 1: Learn from what you did correctly.

- **Carefully read through your answers and reflect on how you answered correctly.** How did you study this information? What helped you recall the correct answer? Could you replicate that study practice going forward? If you guessed correctly was there a process of elimination you exercised that worked well? If not, do you understand now why the other options were incorrect? For short answers and essays, how were you able to recall and synthesize the information? Too often we focus on the errors and neglect to notice what might have worked. Think about the strategies and approaches to your study that helped you arrive at the correct answer and ask yourself if you can expand those practices moving forward. Use the corresponding Exam Analysis table to aid in your review.

STEP 2: Learn from your mistakes.

- **Identify the reason you missed a question.** Did you fail to interpret it correctly? Did you fail to prepare for it? Was the test at a more difficult (or simply different) level than you prepared for? Did you have difficulty applying the knowledge required for the exam? Did it not even occur to you that you would be tested in this way? Did you run out of time? Brainstorm solutions to address any and all of the reasons why you missed a question. Use the corresponding Exam Analysis table to aid in your review. Consider the level of detail and skill of the test/assignment. Were most of the questions on precise details and facts or were they over main ideas and principles? Did they require evaluation, synthesis or analysis in addition to application, comprehension and recognition? Were the questions on material that comes straight from the text, or did the test writer expect you to make sophisticated transformations and analyses? Adjust your exam preparation methods accordingly.
- **Review the procedures you used to study, prepare and complete problem-sets or other assignments.** What did you do that was effective/wasn't effective? What can you do differently in preparation for the final exam/project? If you don't receive complete feedback as to what you did ineffectively, ask your TA or instructor for feedback and their recommendation on how you can go about not only solving problems/doing these kinds of tasks, but also for tips on how to prepare.
- **Adapt your approach to the course as a result of your analysis.** Taking what you've learned from your own analysis and from your conversations with your instructor, TA, classmates, etc., determine which study strategies will best prepare you for the final. Consider not only how you will study, but in what order you will address different tasks, and how much time you will devote to various methods. Be aware that the objectives of different parts of a course can vary considerably, and so exams can also. Final exams may emphasize application, analysis and synthesis more than initial exams as those course objectives become more important in latter portions of the course. Finals are also frequently cumulative, testing a wider range of knowledge, some of which may have been presented months previously. Often, instructors expect students to synthesize large amounts of information for the exam. More demanding questions can be asked in the longer time frame allotted to final exams. Think about how these questions are not just "harder" but qualitatively different than midterm exam questions.