



# An Exam Study Guide

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**Three takeaways from an interview with Mr. Lincoln Smith: repetition, active learning, and empowering your mind**

## Approaching Exams

Exams are right around the corner, and whether we like it or not, it is probably a good idea to approach them as if they *could* lower our current grades. Although it may be possible to get away with minimal preparation this year, this strategy will become increasingly difficult in the years ahead. Not only will we all have to face the IB exams in the next few years, but we will also have to successfully take university exams (these will be more challenging and stressful than our current ones). Given that these exams will continue to play an important role in our lives, it makes sense to get used to taking *and* preparing for them so that we can confidently approach university when the time comes.

As a result of the missed exams last year and this year's online exam situation, however, we are falling behind in terms of our familiarity with exam environments. This means that if we want to best prepare ourselves for future exams — and improve our current grades — we should embrace this year's exams and approach them as if they were any other assessment.

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# Tips and Strategies from UCC Teachers and Students



## *ROMAN BHARATI — STUDENT*

A study technique that has been most effective for me during the pandemic is the Pomodoro technique. You may have heard of it, but essentially, it is a strategy that accommodates focused work for more concentrated segments of time. In terms of logistics, it is a repeated cycle of intensive work for 25 minutes and rests for five minutes. After prolonged periods, the pauses can increase to 10 or even 15 minutes. It has been remarkably effective because it makes it easier for me to get started, which is already half the battle. It also helps make me more aware of where exactly my time is going. Ultimately, it is an effective way to achieve a balance between quantity and quality. Try it out!

## *CALLEGARO — TEACHER*

Look at your exam schedule. Create a detailed calendar for each day (including breaks), working backward from your last exam. This will give you something to keep yourself organized and focused.

## *ETHAN DAWOOD — STUDENT*

A study tip that I like to use when studying for tests and exams that involve a lot of content is to take multiple sets of notes with varying amounts of detail. This process would start by writing one set of notes that involves all the content and many examples. Then, writing a new set of notes that may use fewer examples and may only have more pertinent information. I would repeat this process as much as needed until I felt comfortable with the information. This helped because once I had the least detailed set of notes memorized I would move to the next, this would make sure I covered all of the content in the order of importance.

## *GORDON — STUDENT*

Always take breaks to not cram your study periods by going outside or grabbing a drink.

## *MALEK — STUDENT*

For me, make sure to set goals for yourself — like, by Wednesday I'll finish 3 chapters of this book, fully understood. Make sure to take A LOT of notes in class *and* when reviewing the material. Make sure to review everything a lot and then do a lot of practice questions you can find online depending on the subject. I'm alluding more to mathematics, but this could work for most [subjects]. The most important thing is taking good notes to review every day — make sure to review every day for 10 - 15 minutes only. It could help a lot because the notes you [take] will actually be [recalled] and easier to pinpoint...in the exam. Really good websites to visit are IXL and Khan Academy —Khan Academy gives extremely good explanations on everything.

## *JAMIE EDELIST — STUDENT*

Working out and staying active really helped me keep myself motivated and fresh. Also, to have a good daily routine and sleep schedule will help you focus more during school.

## *APOSTOLOS ZEZOS — STUDENT*

I usually go through my notes and pick out the topics that I least remember or that I know are the most complex. Then I spend at least 50% of my time doing practice problems. I do make sure that there are always solutions to the questions so that I know how to answer each question.

## *MATT ZHANG — STUDENT*

Going outside every day

## *DAVID WOOD — STUDENT*

I like to rewrite my notes on paper and then once I think I know the material I do the review package and figure out what I need to study more. I then study that material and do a practice exam that I found online or that my teacher gave me.

# Mr. Smith's Study Advice

By Nicholas Knoth



A few days ago, I had the pleasure of talking with Mr. Smith, one of the coordinators at UCC's Centre for Learning, about exam preparation and how to best approach it. In our discussion, Mr. Smith generously shared his insights into how our brains actually learn and explained some key ideas that we should keep in mind when we prepare for exams.

## Key Idea — Repetition

The first key idea is about repetition. We are often told that the most important factor to successful learning is repetition. But why is this actually the case? From a neuroscience perspective, Mr. Smith explained how “it is through the consistent use of the [information] that memory is solidified.” Basically, the more we recall and use certain information, the stronger the neural connections in our brains become. This is important because strong neural connections are what enable us to recall information at fast speeds and with minimal effort. One example of our brain's strong neural connections is how we can effortlessly calculate the sum of two and two. This rapid recollection can be explained by strong neural connections in our brains that have been developed through a lot of repetition. Although it would be difficult and time-consuming to develop neural connections as strong as those of basic arithmetic, the goal with exam preparation is to strengthen our neural connections such that we can recall the relevant information with similarly little effort and speed on exam day.

In practice, this can be achieved through intensive repetition and consistency. For example, it would be a good idea to review important material every day, even if it is only for fifteen minutes. This way, Mr. Smith points out, “you create (and strengthen) a chain of neurons” that, in turn, equip us to effortlessly recall information and demonstrate our knowledge during exams. Another key component to this idea is the time frame in which we prepare. By starting our preparation several weeks before exams, we give our brains plenty of time to create and fortify these critical neural connections. Additionally, starting early enables us to space out study blocks so that we can avoid having to study for hours on end and instead designate smaller, spaced-out periods of time to studying.

## Key Idea — Active Studying

The second idea that Mr. Smith talked about was that of active versus passive studying. While passive studying includes activities like re-watching classes and reading textbooks, active studying includes activities such as taking notes and solving practice problems. Another way to think about this concept, Mr. Smith says, is to determine if an activity results in incoming information or outgoing information. According to Mr. Smith, active study techniques that involve learning by outputting information will almost always be more effective than passive techniques when it comes to strengthening those neural connections that I mentioned earlier.

# Mr. Smith's Study Advice



For example, when you are reviewing math concepts that you are already comfortable with, “it is going to be really helpful to explain all these [concepts] to somebody else...for solidifying and strengthening your memory and neural connections.” On the other hand, “listening to somebody else do it will not be that useful to you.” The idea behind this is to focus on “expressive” study methods rather than “receptive” ones when reviewing content.

In practice, the takeaway is to focus on active study techniques rather than passive ones. This means that if you find yourself spending large amounts of time watching long lectures or reading chapters in textbooks, it may be beneficial to switch gears and start taking notes or tackling practice problems.

## Key Idea — Mind & Body

A third concept that Mr. Smith explained relates to motivation and brain optimization. Mr. Smith explained that you have to “recognize that your mind is part of your body and your body is your source of energy.” The idea here is that our capacity to learn and study is closely related to physiological factors such as nutrition, exercise, and sleep. If we fail to prepare our bodies for productivity, we prevent our minds from being in a position to absorb information and perform well on exams.

With this in mind, Mr. Smith recommends thinking about the physiological factors that may be holding you back from being in the best state of mind to study. If you only get five hours of sleep per night or forget to exercise regularly and then find it difficult to concentrate during the day, it may be worth changing your daily routines to put your body and mind in the best position to study. In fact, Mr. Smith says that “if you are sleeping, exercising, eating well, and giving yourself breaks every day...you should be in a really good position to be able to perform.”

Based on my own experience implementing Mr. Smith's study strategies, I can say that they truly make a difference. I would encourage anyone looking to boost their study productivity to adopt Mr. Smith's advice as well as the numerous tips and tricks shared by students and teachers on the second page of this magazine.

## Key Resource — Prep Calendar

Finally, if you are looking for organizational resources, you can also check out these exam prep calendars provided by the Centre for Learning to stay organized:

- [Year 8 Exam Prep Calendar](#)
- [Year 9 Exam Prep Calendar](#)
- [Year 10 Exam Prep Calendar](#)
- [Year 11 Exam Prep Calendar](#)