

Cramming With Style

In Emergencies

First, summon up your arrogance. There is no reason you should take an "F" because you haven't studied, and if the instructor knew that you intended to do nothing and hope for the best, he/she would say that you deserve to fail. A good student makes the best of every situation.

Lesson number one: There are right and wrong ways to cram. The wrong (and most popular) way is to attempt to get it all down in three or four (or fewer) mega-sessions, just before an exam. The results are best illustrated by an analogy: if you skipped breakfast for 21 mornings, and then attempted to eat 21 breakfasts in one sitting, what would happen to your stomach? How much nourishment would your body receive? Cramming three weeks' worth of notes and book studying into a few sessions will result in your actually retaining only a portion of what you try to learn.

Knowing this, accept a reality: you have to be selective in what you try to learn in a relatively short time. Select those concepts, terms, formulas, etc., that you are going to master while cramming, and forget the rest. Yes, you will undoubtedly miss some questions on details, and yes, people who have been reviewing all along and keeping up with the work will do better than you on the exam. Your goal is not to get an "A" but to do as well as you can, given the time you have to work with.



Lesson number two: Learn some strategies for quickly reviewing materials you haven't studied thoroughly, and for creating study notes. For example, here is a technique for studying chapters you haven't read thoroughly enough (or at all):

- Allow yourself ten minutes per chapter missed to scan the chapter
- Scan for main ideas only: read chapter title, ask yourself how it fits into what's been lectured on; read preface and summary next; go back and frame one question for each subhead in the chapter (example: chapter sub-head is "Causes of Depression," so an appropriate question is "What are the causes of depression?"); read quickly for the answer to that question. Jot answers down, if you have time.
- Recite main ideas out loud as often as you have time to; reciting is a good memory reinforcer.

For notes you haven't been reviewing faithfully, reduce each set to one page of important terms and concepts. Put the terms and concepts on the left side of a two-inch margin, and the definitions/explanations on the other side. Recite them aloud, then try reciting without looking at the notes.

Lesson number three: If possible, study with other people.

Lesson number four: When studying with others, don't get panicked when everyone starts talking about how much they've studied and how well they know the material. (They're probably exaggerating anyway!)

Think positively, and stay on task.

