

The study plan

Studying efficiently over five days is a great goal for many undergraduate exams.

A study plan reduces your stress because it helps you stay on track and prioritize healthy habits. The SASS study plan allows you to consider how much time you may need for different courses and helps you distribute your review time among all of them. It includes:

- how to create an exam study schedule using three-hour study blocks
- how to use three-hour study blocks effectively.

This study schedule works best when you have a period of time with no classes, such as the study week before finals in December and April. Ideally, try to finish the term work of readings, assignments, quizzes, presentations, etc. by the last day of classes in Week 12, so you can then shift to “study mode.” For classes with unfinished term work, you will need to both finish the course requirements and study during the exam period.

Create your study schedule

1. Find out your exam dates and how much each exam is worth.
2. Create a calendar starting with the week or two before exams begin, and divide the day into three time slots (morning, afternoon, evening), or download our template at <http://sass.queensu.ca/learningstrategies/decemberapril-exam-study-schedule/>
3. Fill in your exam schedule, using the appropriate time slot. For example: 9 a.m. exams would go in the morning slot, 2 p.m. in the afternoon slot and 7 p.m. in the evening slot. Include each exam’s percentage of the final course mark. Colour-code the different exams, or highlight all exam times, for easy identification.
4. Add any other fixed commitments, and be realistic.
5. Assign specific hours to three daily blocks of time during which you will totally commit to studying. The blocks should be about 3 hours each, and the study blocks must be separated by 2 hours, to allow for memory consolidation and down time. Enter those times on the right-hand side of the calendar (e.g., 9 a.m.-12 p.m.; 2-5 p.m.; 7-10 p.m.).
6. Use the “hours needed” table on the Exam Study Schedule template: for every exam, estimate the number of hours you need to catch up on incomplete term work that won’t be finished by the last day of classes. Then estimate the number of hours you want to spend studying (making review sheets, drilling, and self-testing). Consider your goals, the difficulty of the course, and how much the exam is worth as you estimate these hours; many students study for 10-20 hours for each exam, once they have finished all their term work.
7. Add up the total number of hours you estimated to catch up and study. Divide this number by three to calculate the number of three-hour blocks you’ll need to find in your schedule. See if you have this many blocks available. If there aren’t enough blocks, consider reducing fixed commitments or reducing catch-up or study time for some or all courses.

8. Starting with your most difficult course, work backwards from the exam date and assign three-hour study blocks to available time slots in your schedule. Use a pencil as this part is very flexible and you'll probably change it a couple of times. Count the number of study sessions or hours; does the number reach your target?
9. Repeat the "working backwards" method for each course. There is no perfect plan: just try to distribute the study sessions for each course across several days, and reach your targeted number of study hours.
10. Stick to your plan! Typical obstacles include:
 - losing motivation or energy. Try studying with a friend, doing something fun at the end of your day, exercising during your breaks, and remembering your goals.
 - feeling overwhelmed and tired. Try looking at your calendar and seeing when exams are over; take heart, and get some sleep.
 - miscalculating how much studying is needed for a course. Try redistributing your study sessions, filling in some of the blank periods on your calendar with added study sessions, or reducing your grade expectations.

Key planning tips

- Aim for a sustainable study schedule. It's like training for a marathon; every day makes a difference.
- The two-hour breaks are essential. They allow your brain to consolidate the information you've been rehearsing, and allow you to relax, eat, and exercise.
- Try to schedule study blocks at the same time of day that the course's exam is scheduled.
- Study for two or three courses in a day.
- Maximize your memory by distributing, for example, 15 hours of study over five or six days, rather than over two or three days.
- Study the hardest material during your peak learning times.
- Sleep supports memory. Aim to sleep 7-9 hours/night.
- Try *not* to study nine hours each day. It's OK not to study every available minute!

Keep a positive attitude: "I'll do my best, and that is good enough!"

How to use three-hour study blocks

After you've made an [exam study schedule](#), your next challenge is to balance the *time* you have available with the volume of *material* you have to study, to make a great study plan.

For each course:

- Count the number of blocks of study time that you estimated for the schedule (not including any catch-up blocks you needed).
- Divide your course material into chunks, so that the number of chunks equals one less than the number of blocks (e.g., 5 blocks and 4 chunks, 7 blocks and 6 chunks). Chunks can be divided into topics or units, or number of pages, or importance of the material within the whole course, or chapters, or in any other meaningful way.

If each chunk cannot realistically be covered in 2 or 2.5 hours, you may need to rethink your exam study schedule to re-allocate the study time you have available, or alter your expectations of your preparedness for the exam.

- In each three-hour block of time, spend about 10-20 minutes reviewing recently studied material, about 2.5 hours studying fresh material, and about 15 minutes testing yourself on the fresh material. Find practical study strategies and tips at <https://sass.queensu.ca/exam-prep/>.
- Take breaks over the three-hour block of time, to allow information to be consolidated in your memory (e.g., 50 minutes on and 10 minute break, every hour for three hours).
- Enjoy non-intellectual activities for two hours between study blocks to further support your memory. Stretch, go for a walk, eat, relax, and check your phone. Set a timer if you need to end your break on time.

See the example on the next page for a sample plan. Five study days, producing 15 efficient study hours, is just an example—your courses may need more or a bit less.

Your plan will reflect your own needs. Many students study between 10-20 hours for each exam.

Staying on top of academic demands is a skill that can be developed with coaching and practice. Learning Strategies resources and services can help you build skills in maintaining motivation, managing time, taking good notes over the term, and more.

Example: How to use three-hour study blocks in a five-day plan (total studying time: 15 hours)

	Course chunk 1	Course chunk 2	Course chunk 3	Course chunk 4	
Time block 1 (e.g., Thurs. afternoon)	Study chunk 1 (2hrs 15 min) Self-test chunk 1 (about 15 min)				
Time block 2 (e.g., Fri. morning)	Review chunk 1 (10 min)	Study chunk 2 (2hrs 15 min) Self-test chunk 2 (about 15 min)			
Time block 3 (e.g., Sat. afternoon)	Review chunk 1 (5 min)	Review chunk 2 (10 min)	Study chunk 3 (2hrs 15 min) Self-test chunk 3 (about 15 min)		
Time block 4 (e.g., Sun. morning)	Review chunk 1 (5 min)	Review chunk 2 (5 min)	Review chunk 3 (10 min)	Study chunk 4 (2hrs 15 min) Self-test chunk 4 (15 min)	
Time block 5 (e.g., Sun. evening)	Review chunk 1 (10 min)	Review chunk 2 (10 min)	Review chunk 3 (10 min)	Review chunk 4 (10 min)	Comprehensive mini-exam! Chunks 1-4 (about 2 hours)
Write your exam!					

Remember to take short breaks during a three-hour block.

What does it mean to study? Summarize using an organized structure (e.g., mind map, table, concept summary, Cornell notes) to see relationships and connections between ideas, and drill, drill, drill.

What does it mean to self-test? Answer practice questions from your text, assignments, or Exam Bank, or ones you have created based on the course learning objectives or tips from your prof about what is most important.

What does it mean to review? A more general refreshing of your memory, focusing on what you did not know during your self-test of that content.

What is a comprehensive mini-exam? A practice exam, written under “real exam” conditions (e.g., times, formula sheet, open book).