

Preparing for the Examinations

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Are you writing exams in a few weeks from now? Then, I would sincerely suggest you can stop reading this article and go back to your studies. This article is surely less important than your studies, and may be you can come back once you have taken your exams. If you have some time in hand – say about couple of months or so, then read on.

What is this article all about?

I have written several articles for students which are published on my own site at www.vinodkothari.com/tutorials/ as also on the CA Club India site at <http://www.caclubindia.com>. I never thought I will write these articles – the first one was simply an introductory piece as we were putting together a resources page for students. However, as I posted this on the CA Club site, there was tumultuous response – which prompted me to write more. The article How to Attempt Theory Papers got more than 50 comments, and still counting. Since students are appreciating words of advice, I thought I will continue to write.

This article is about methodology – how to study and how to prepare for the examinations. Usually I have maintained that substance is more important than form. How much you study is far more important than how to. However, I have also maintained that like in all spheres in life, one has to strike a balance between form and substance. So, “how to” is equally important. For example, one cannot say – how you drive is not important, how much you drive matters. The same argument holds good for studies too.

Like for my other articles, whatever I say in this article is all my own experience. I have tried each one of the things I say here myself. As I take satisfaction in saying that my performance as a student was not bad at all, I can boldly say that my advice below is tested for positive results.

How many hours do I study?

This question obviously does not have any firm answer. It is the same as saying – how much should I eat? The answer is obvious – you eat so much as you can digest. Same principle holds for studies – study as much as your system can take. The answer remains vague and subjective, however, there are a few things that I need to say.

First, every one would like to increase the ability to spend time on studies, particularly close to examinations. I have seen those who sort-of continue to maintain cushy life style even during examinations. They sleep and eat like monsters, spend time before the TV, and so on, and they take pride in saying that they maintain their cool even during examinations. I do not mean to lose my cool too, but then, preparing for examinations is a

culmination of the long semester that I would have spent on my studies. It is like going for the final, decisive match. If Sachin starts walking up and down before he has to go for batting, it does not mean he is restless – it only means he is taking each match seriously. So I surely attach sufficient seriousness to my exams, and I cannot continue to enjoy the same life style that I maintain round the year.

At the other extreme, you will find students who become emotional wrecks before their exams. They suddenly realize that they have a mountain of studies before them. One, they are naturally nervous. Two, they think they have to become nervous, because being nervous is like being serious. This is another extreme.

In fact, moving into examinations is a slow process. You have to slowly change your life style and come into exam mode. I suggest this should start at least 2 months before the examinations. What exactly do you have to do? Among the very concrete things, I would strongly recommend slowing reducing, and finally giving up, evening meals. You think I am stoic, harsh or too impractical? No, in fact, you would realize it has so much impact on your ability to study. Note the following:

- Heavy food in the evening necessarily makes you sleepy. If your tummy is light, and you are feeling mildly hungry, you will be able to sleep less and work more.
- Sure enough, you cannot leave evening meals suddenly. That is why I said it is a slow process. Do it gradually. First, prepone evening meals – eat early. Then, slightly cut on the evening food, and finally, you can switch to either liquid diets or totally give up evening meals.
- If you are taking milk in the night, I would suggest take it several hours before your normal sleeping time, as milk has a mild tranquilizing impact.
- Many people have parents, particularly mothers, who would serve them more food savory stuff during exams, thinking their child needs all this. They are expressing their affection for you – so don't blame them, but politely decline this. Many people love to keep foodstuff on their study desks, as if eating helps them to stay awake – this is big foolishness. Food only puts you to sleep. Of course, there are spices like cardamoms and cloves that help in alertness, and take sleep off, but we surely do not need to wake beyond capacity. We only need to ensure that we do not excess-sleep.
- Are you scared that going light on evening meals, you will lose your weight? In fact, you will not. In fact, you will feel yourself more agile, more fresh. And even if you do, you can always regain your weight after your exams.

I must stress that I am not recommending waking long hours at a stretch. In fact, I very strongly suggest that sufficient rest is necessary for both body and mind, more for the latter than the former. Therefore, I lay stress on both (a) gradually tuning up the body so that it needs less sleep; and (b) going light on evening meals so that there is more agility and natural lightness in the body.

I am very much against waking up the night before the exams. You need sufficient rest every day, but you need it all the more on the night before the exams. Agility of the mind is very very important while you are sitting to write the examinations actually. My

experience is that if I have not slept sufficiently on the night before the exam, the head gets heavy, and ability to think, analyze and retrieve from the mind gets adversely affected. So, I am completely opposed to the policy of waking up the night before the exam and sleeping the day after the exam.

In fact, I am anyway very opposed to irregular sleeping. Sleeping, like eating, is a matter of habit. The body is attuned to sleeping and eating based on a biological clock. If you are able to gradually adjust the clock and set it to your preferred time for sleeping, it is fine. But do not tinker with the biological clock. For example, if you sleeping one day at 2 am in the night, and the second day at 7 pm, you are doing damage to your system, and I can bet on it that you end up effectively sleeping more than sleep at regular intervals.

Some people have greatly mistaken notions about the divisibility and fungibility of sleep. Sleep is neither divisible, nor fungible. That is, sleeping for 6 hours at a stretch is not the same thing as sleeping for 2 hours once, and then another 4 hours later. You can not split sleep like this. If you need 6 hours at a stretch, then split-sleeping will make you sleep more, and you will still feel tired. This is my undoubted experience, and take my word for it – every one who understands biology or life science will agree with it.

Neither is sleep fungible – meaning, if you need to sleep in the night, you cannot make it up by sleeping in the day.

So, the rule is, sleep at regular time, both on the night before the exam, as also while preparing for the exams. The change of life-style, for example, reducing sleeping time from 8 hours to 6 hours, has to come gradually over a period of time. And sleep at one stretch, preferably in the night only.

What posture?

I would have normally not given much stress on this question, but I have seen some students sit at such postures that they are sure of sleeping with the book in their hand. If you take a place, setting or posture that promotes sleep, then you are inviting sleep to overtake you. Stretching on a soft, cushy *gadda*, lying on tummy with legs stretched, within half an hour, you will fall asleep on the half-open book. Needless to say, don't use settings that promote sleep. Try to sit erect, back not resting. So, a table in front where you can place book/writing pads is the best setting.

When do I study? Day or night?

There may be biological rules as to what is good time when the brain is more agile, but I think this is rather a question of when do you find the environs more conducive for studies. It is ultimately a question of habit, and like I said before, one must follow a regular routine. Sleeping during the day and studying in the night may not work if you are a busy or noisy place where you get regularly disturbed. At the same time, studying during the day may be difficult particularly in crowded areas of cities. So, one needs to find the most peaceful time for studying, as also the most appropriate time for sleep. Both need to be given their proper slots. The experimentation may stop about 2 months before

the exams, and then just follow one regular routine, may be slowing cutting on the time to sleep.

Alone or in groups?

There is a dialectical saying – single person sleeps, two persons study, three persons play, and four persons quarrel. I am not sure about two persons studying, but I surely have experience of 3 persons studying, and it is correct that we ended up playing. The academic year in which I tried group study was the worst for me. So, I strongly recommend against group studying. Even while studying in libraries, students spend more time in gossip, glancing at what others are doing, and since it is always tempting to follow the one who is least serious about studies, one always finds one such person who is a jay-walker, and you would lose your own seriousness because you will find around people who are less serious. So, according to me, studying in the library should be resorted only if you don't have a better place.

If you have someone around, who you think is more disciplined than you, then choose the company of one, and not more than one such person. Otherwise, stay alone. Once again, this is my self-tested experience, as I have tried each of the situations – self-study, group study, library study, etc.

Which subject do I study when?

On this, my firm conviction is as follows – subjects that require activity, for example, practicals, should be reserved for the night. The rule is simple – if the subject requires simply reading and memorizing, night time may not be good for this, as sleep will overtake you. Morning hours would be far better.

While on this point, I would also strongly suggest that in subjects that require only reading or memorizing, underlining the important points in the text, or scribbling notes, is not a bad idea at all. I have always made notes while studying. I don't recommend first studying and then coming back to make notes – I will rather make notes while studying itself. I may not ever refer back to the notes, but the process of making notes has several great advantages. First, the concepts become far more clear as you methodically jot down the sequence of an argument. Writing makes reading perfected. Two, the very fact that you are writing means you are doing something which is overt, and requires your activity. Hence, it ensures involvement. If you are doing plain reading, the mind will continue to wander places. You have the page in hand for long time which you have not read at all. On the contrary, writing ensures concentration and involvement.

These are some of my stray thoughts on “how to study”, but it is never possible to generalize the “how to” part as everyone has one's own technique. If you have a technique that is working for you, you do not need to follow mine.

And, once again, I must emphasise that any amount of “how to” study advice cannot obviate the need for “how much to”. You need to spend hard core time on studies – techniques are not a substitute.

If you feel this article does any good to you, you may send me either a compliment or question at vinod@vinodkothari.com. If there are questions that I have not answered here, I will think of writing a follow up article – so, do post your questions. And don't forget that we have lots of student resources at www.vinodkothari.com/tutorials/ .

Good luck with your exams.