

Ideas on How to Prepare For Math Exams

Adapted from original work of Warren Sembaliuk

- Do not study math. DO MATH!!! Practice, practice and more practice. The question then becomes WHAT to practice or HOW to practice.
- Go through old exams and look at the types of questions that you got wrong and identify WHY you got them wrong. Find other similar questions among your resource or online or from a BOOK and practice on them too.
- If, when analyzing a question that you answered incorrectly, you discover that the WHY is because you did not know how to handle some aspect of it, seek help from any Math teacher or fellow student that understands that aspect, and RELEARN the concept. Do two or three similar questions with the person helping you, then do two or three on your own.
- Another approach is the generalized approach: for a topic, say trigonometry, ask yourself what you already know and then write it down. Next, ask yourself to explain the meaning of what you wrote. Then identify what sorts of questions can be answered by using that. Math should not JUST be about doing. As much as possible it should be about UNDERSTANDING why you are doing things. The meaning is crucial! Combining rationale and meaning helps you achieve true learning.
- Practice in a quiet environment free of distractions.
- Practice for short periods of time, around 15 minutes, then take a 2-minute break (NOT a 20 minute one!), and then resume for another 15 minutes. Do this as long as needed and as long as your focus stays, then move on to a different task and, when ready and if needed, come back to math.
- You must start practicing for an exam several days before it. Prepare well enough in advance, so that you may take the night before the exam off, a good practice IF you are ready for the exam!
- Be sure to get a good night's sleep, usually 8 hours.
- During the two hours before going to bed, make sure to be away from any sort of electronic screens (TV, cell phone, computer screen, video game screen). These screens affect the neural pathways in your brain and reduce your retention and recall of the information. They also inhibit the production of melatonin (the sleep hormone), thus reducing the beneficial effects of sleep.
- You must also make sure to properly feed and, especially, hydrate your brain before the exam. By drinking water the night before and first thing in the morning, as well as having a good meal, are excellent things to do. The extra water helps neural impulses and chemical signals flow more easily.
- And finally, be positive! Do not dwell on how poorly you think you may do, for as the mind thinks so shall the body do and such thoughts may create the disasters they fear.
- And, should you realize after the fact that you had not prepared properly, then take responsibility for your actions by learning from the experience and developing a better strategy for next time. Mistakes are a great way to learn: do your best to avoid them DURING an exam, but if they occur, make a quenching lemonade by learning a lot from them.