



TATP TIPSHEET

Preparing Students for Exams

As TAs, the task of preparing students to write examinations often falls on our shoulders. Preparing a successful exam review takes time and preparation on your part. You should view exam preparation as a process with several steps. Below are a few helpful hints to ensure that your students are up to the challenge of writing an exam.

Step 1: Prepare Yourself

Realize that the students are going to have a lot of questions about the upcoming exam and that they both want and need reassurance from you. They will appreciate it if you are knowledgeable about what is expected of them, so it helps to familiarize yourself with the course goals and the assessment goals as well as the exam procedures before the review even starts.

✓ **Speak with the professor**

Meet with the professor before your review session to get some information about the exam layout and procedure. Some questions you could ask are:

- i. What format will the exam take? (i.e. Essay questions, short answer, multiple choice, etc.)
- ii. Will the exam cover the entire course or only part of the material?
- iii. Are there any key areas which the students are expected to master?
- iv. What are the professor's expectations for the answer (i.e. what constitutes an A,B or C answer? What is a failing answer?)?
- v. Are you going to be grading your own students' exams?
- vi. Are old exams available? If so, where are they found and can you use them in your review? Can your students use the old exams for their own review purposes?

✓ **Speak to fellow TAs in the course**

If there are other TAs in your course, speak with them regarding their review experience. Ask them how they conduct their exam review, how they manage the time, what problems their students have encountered on past exams etc. You should also discuss how you will mark the exam with them to ensure that everyone is marking to the same standard.

✓ **Familiarize yourself with your department's exam procedures**

Students will often ask questions like "Can I see my exam afterwards?" or "Can I get my exam regarded?". It helps to know what your department's policy is regarding these matters. If you can give your students an exact layout of procedure (i.e. "You can see your exam afterwards, but you must pay a fee to do so.") they will appreciate it because there won't be any nasty surprises! A handy link for Arts and Science courses:

<http://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/current/undergraduate/exams/>

✓ **Think back to your own undergraduate days**

What do you remember most about exam periods when you were an undergraduate? What problems did you have to face? What do you wish the professors and TAs had done differently? Thinking about this can help you put together a “student friendly” review session. Students often respond to personal anecdotes (i.e. “Make sure you know when the exam is being held. Don’t do what I did one year and turn up for an exam three days early!”). If they feel that you understand something of what they are going through, this will help ease their anxieties.

Step 2: Preparing Your Review

Now that the background work is done, you can start preparing your review session.

✓ **Work out how much time you have to devote to review**

Some courses give you a time limit, others allow you a little more leeway. Look at your timetable and decide how much time will be needed to cover the important points. As a general rule, students often become bored with review sessions that last too long (i.e. two classes or more).

✓ **Identify key issues**

What are the things the students simply HAVE to know? Did the professor emphasize one aspect more than others (think back to your conversation with the professor here)? What are issues your students had trouble with? How would you have them go about writing an essay question, or a lab report, or a short definition section? What are some tips for working with multiple choice questions?

✓ **How will you make the session memorable?**

One danger with these sessions is overloading the students with too much information. It helps to do something fun with the review (i.e. make the questions into a board game, or a “Jeopardy”-style game, etc.). Not only will you cover the key points, but the students will also remember what they are being taught. It also helps relax students.

✓ **Realize that your time is limited**

You won’t be able to go over every little thing covered every week for the entire year. Don’t beat yourself up if you have to leave some things out. It’s important that your students realize this, too, and that they realize it is their responsibility to do a more thorough review of the course material on their own. Your review should highlight important areas or review problem areas, not re-teach the entire course.

Step 3: Review Session

✓ **The class before the review session**

Remind your students that a review session will be coming up next class (don’t be surprised if attendance suddenly increases the following week!). Ask them to review the material and think up any questions that they may have beforehand. If you intend to hold extra office hours, now is the time to announce this.

✓ **Go over the basics in the review class**

Review when, where and for how long the exam will be held. Remind students of the basic ground rules of exam halls (i.e. student ID on desk, cell phone turned off and stored away—in fact,

discourage your students from bringing cell phones, PDAs and iPods.) This could save you headaches later.

✓ **Allow time for questions**

Students will have a lot of questions for you and you must allow time for them. Try to answer them as honestly as possible, but know when to stop (i.e. the student who pushes you for the answers, students who ask you to go easy on their exams because they badly need a good grade...all these questions deserve an icy stare!).

✓ **Try to keep the mood light**

Students are nervous enough as it is. Try to make the session fun and light-hearted. If they panic in the session, it won't bode well for the exam!

✓ **Let students know when and where they can contact you after the class is over**

Be reasonable and realistic about your availability. Set limits for how much email correspondence you will read and answer, and how many office hours you will hold.

✓ **Answer email queries promptly and calmly**

Realize that students are likely to be more demanding at this time of year than at other times, so you may be seeing an increase in email traffic. Acknowledge all messages promptly and calmly, but resist the urge to teach via email. Do not write long explanatory messages. Invite students to meet you during your office hours for more detailed explanations. Do not re-explain a concept that was covered thoroughly in class. Note the most common questions and areas of concern, and post your suggested answers to the most common questions on a course website, or send out one email to all class members, or announce supplementary office hours to specifically address the questions raised in student emails. Know that sometimes all students are asking through their panicked emails is "Will I be all right?".

And Finally...

✓ **Know the limits of your responsibility!**

Even if you do follow all these steps, it is likely that some students will still perform badly. **DO NOT BLAME YOURSELF FOR THIS!!!** (or let the students blame you). You did your job and the truth is some students really struggle with exam situations, no matter how much preparation is offered them.

Created by Jennifer Brewer, TATP Trainer ©2006

For more TA teaching resources, go to <http://www.utoronto.ca/tatp/resources/index.html>.