
Exam Post-mortem and Error Analysis

Each type of exam or test error suggests a different type of remedy—it's not always just a matter of increasing studying time. Sometimes students need to study “differently,” or they need to change their exam writing strategies. When reviewing exam or test errors, it's helpful to try to analyze and categorize each one.

Errors of Omission

Do you recognize the material as being from a class you missed or a chapter in the text you didn't read?

- If so, focus your attention on making sure that you attend every class and keep up to date with course readings. This isn't really a study issue—it's a work load and time management issue.

Did you run out of time when preparing for the exam and had to skip important material, even though you knew it might be on the exam?

- Integrate a weekly review period into your study routine. The best time to review your notes is 24 hours within a lecture, to refresh and solidify the information in your memory before it begins to fade. That way, your knowledge of the information will be more complete when exam study time comes, and it will take less time to review before the exam.
- You can also consolidate your weekly lecture and textbook notes into a one- or two-page summary. Begin each week's review by looking over the summary sheets, beginning with week one every time. This method will begin to prepare you for exams well in advance.

Careless Errors

Did you lose marks for a simple error?

- Everyone makes this type of mistake, but if you're prone to this, try to plan your exam time so you have some time at the end to carefully review your paper.

Did you answer too many or too few questions, skip a question unknowingly, or misread directions?

- Plan your exam time carefully, and slow down when reading directions. Use stress management strategies so you enter the exam calm and focused.

Errors of Priority

Did you decide that certain material was not important enough to study in detail?

- Review the criteria you used to decide what was important enough to study thoroughly. Did you make conscious, informed decisions about what to emphasize, or was your approach random? What sources of information are you using to create your selection criteria: instructor hints, previous tests, course outlines, old exams, what you've heard from other students?
- Listen actively for any information that the instructor gives, overtly and covertly, about the exam.

Insufficient Mastery

Do you remember studying a topic, but just can't remember it in enough detail during the exam? Could you see in your mind the page where the information was, but just couldn't recall it?

- This is one of the few situations where simply studying more is beneficial. Be sure to test yourself as you're studying to ensure that you know the information thoroughly. A fun way to do this is to try to guess what the professor might ask, and write your own questions to answer. Then, come back to the questions the next day and see if you can still answer them thoroughly. You can also trade questions with your friends as a way to study in a group.
- Plan study time strategically to allow enough time to study adequately. (See our handout on time management.)
- Keep up with day-to-day course work so exam studying time doesn't become "catch up" time.
- Integrate a weekly review period into your study routine so that you avoid last-minute cramming.

Going Beyond the Facts

Were you unable to come up with an answer for a question that went beyond a simple recall of fact — a question that asked you to apply, analyze, synthesize, or make a judgment?

- Mastery of the material is necessary to answer questions like these. You can't figure out how to go beyond the facts if you're struggling to remember or understand the facts themselves. Use old exams to acquaint yourself with the type of questions you might be asked, and broaden your thinking about how the course content can be applied or analyzed.

Approaches to Learning and Studying

When you looked at the question in the exam, did you feel that you had no idea how to answer? When you look at the question after getting the exam back, are you still confused?

- Each course involves some combination of content (factual information) and concept (general idea). As a student, part of your responsibility is to analyze the course demands and determine how to learn and study in that particular course. Courses that focus on factual information require very different approaches to learning and studying than do courses that focus on analysis, problem solving, and the application of concepts.
- If you have no idea how to answer a question, it is possible that your studying focused on understanding facts and details, called a "surface approach" to learning, when the question requires a "deep approach," involving an understanding of concepts and deeper underlying theories or assumptions. To be successful, students need to understand the difference between deep and surface learning, and have a range of study strategies at their disposal.
- For additional assistance with learning styles and study strategies, make an appointment with a study skills tutor.

Exam Anxiety

Do you block, freeze, or forget information during the exam, but then recall it shortly afterwards?

- Everyone gets nervous before an exam. But for some students the nervousness is so intense it affects their exam results. Blocking or forgetting information during an exam, only to have it come flooding back shortly afterward, is a symptom of exam anxiety. (Also see our handout on exam anxiety.)