

Political Sociology: Preparing for Applied and Conceptual Multiple Choice Exams

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Abstract:

This hand-out for undergraduate students guides student activities as they go about the business of preparing for applied and conceptual multiple choice exams.

Details:

Resource Types	Class Activity
Authors	DaShanne Parker Stokes University of Pittsburgh
Date Published	2/28/2012
Subject Area	Political Sociology
Class Level	College 300
Class Size	Any
Language	English

Usage Notes:

Students have reported that this hand-out was very useful and I observed a dramatic improvement in test scores after distributing the hand-out. I now make the hand-out available at the beginning of the semester to shape student study activities outside the classroom. *Can be used with Political Sociology Syllabus by same author

Learning Goals and Assessments:

Goal	Students will learn how to improve their studying activities in preparation for applied and conceptual exams.
Assessment	Instructors can actively assess student understanding through in-class discussions and activities.
Goal	Students will learn how to take command of scholarly readings by structuring their study activities around skimming and applying concepts and theories to real world events.

Assessment	Student ability to apply theory to real world events can be assessed through the memo assignment detailed in the attached syllabus.
Goal	
Assessment	Student general study habits can be assessed through the assessment tool that is part of this document.

Resource Files:

StokesExamPrep.docx

StokesPoliticalSocSyllabus.docx

Preparing for Applied and Conceptual Exams

by DaShanne Stokes

I very much want my students to do well and get the most out of our time together, so this informal handout is meant to roughly outline some hints and general observations to help shape students' activities as they prepare for taking my applied and conceptual multiple-choice exams. This handout is by no means comprehensive and, of course, cannot guarantee success. Likewise, it is not offered as the "right" way to study for every student. It provides only a starting point and assumes that students will go on to draw upon their experiences and tailor their activities to their particular needs, strengths, and weaknesses.

Self-Awareness

I think one of the most important things that helped me in my own studies was becoming more self-aware of myself as a student, that is, becoming aware of my own strengths and weaknesses, my personal habits and needs, what times of day I perform better or worse, etc. Everyone learns differently, and it helped me tremendously to learn about my own personal learning style, i.e., how I best learned things, so that I could devise my own personal approach and activities that I could do on my own that best suited my needs. If you want to do well, I very strongly encourage you to spend some time getting to know yourself. Think back to when you did your best, when you did your worst, and maximize what seemed to help most and minimize what helped the least. Try to identify any larger patterns there might be between times you did best versus when you did worse. Identify your own personal strengths, weaknesses, needs, and habits, and adapt your activities accordingly. Exercise and exploit your strengths, but be sure to compensate for your weaknesses. It is not always easy to catch sight of one's strengths and weaknesses or how to adapt to these, so you may wish to enlist the help of a professional. It is crucial to learn what you bring to the table, to identify where you're at in the larger context, so you can make your way forward from there.

Participation

I encourage all my students to actively participate in class. I find that those students who come to class and who participate *actively*, i.e., who pay attention and follow along with class discussions, who ask questions when they are unsure about something (whether in class or with me personally, or who ask their colleagues outside of class), who take part in class activities, who share their opinions, and who complete the homework assignments, etc., tend to earn grades that are one to two letter grades better, on average, than those who do not. Attendance and participation is important especially because many of the class's lessons are found not just in those things explicitly stated in the readings or that might be written on the board or included in a powerpoint, but the lessons are also those that *emerge* in class and that instructors help guide the class to draw out and weave together through class discussions, activities, and assignments--and one cannot get these larger lessons without being there and actively participating.

Some students naturally speak more than others (especially when the class is large), and some students know more and are more outgoing than others, but this is okay. Additionally, people from different cultures and with different experiences naturally have different styles of participating, so it's also okay to be shy or quiet in class so long as you follow along and take part in class activities to the extent to which you're comfortable. Our class is a safe environment and we want to hear from everyone from all backgrounds and of all opinions. Students also sometimes feel intimidated by others when they know more or *seem* to know more. But no one, myself included, has perfect or complete knowledge about everything we'll talk about, so it's very much okay if there are things you don't know because there are things we all don't know and we're here to learn *together*. Coming to class and making an effort to participate will tremendously improve your odds of doing well on the exams. Also, not only do you get

out of the course only as much as you put in, but your participation will make the class more fun and engaging for everyone.

Prep Time, Organization, and Other Tidbits

Many universities view 2-3 hours of study time for every hour spent inside class as a good rule of thumb in determining how much time to invest in studying. Note that this study time is *in addition* to time spent in class, completing assigned readings, and assignments. This means that students spending less than six to nine hours a week studying and prepping are likely not investing sufficient time to garner a good grade. If you find yourself not getting the kinds of grades you desire, you may wish to determine how much time you are investing in the course and make adjustments where necessary.

It helps tremendously to you keep yourself organized and follow a schedule. Try to pay attention to how much time you invest in a particular activity. Strategize how much time you spend on various activities, and rank order your activities according to their relative importance. Determine what matters most and invest your time accordingly.

Please don't procrastinate or put things off until the last minute. If you feel you're struggling with the material, please ask for help. There's no shame in not understanding because there are things we all don't understand. Please don't wait until a week or even two weeks before an exam to ask for help because it takes time to identify problems students may be having and it may take some trial and error to see what works best for you individually. It takes time to develop the skills you need to do well on exams. Please help others help you by giving them sufficient time to help you.

Also, if at all possible, try to complete required readings a week ahead of time, and try to complete larger class projects for all your classes (e.g., term papers, etc.) *two or three weeks* ahead of time. This helps to ensure that you complete everything on time and with sufficient time for editing and other tweaking to generate the best results. It also means you won't suffer as dramatically if life should throw you a curve ball, and when material comes up in class it will be more of a review for you--meaning you'll have more time to digest more subtle nuances, to ask questions to clarify your understanding, to participate, and ultimately raise your exam scores even more.

It can help tremendously to talk to others about the material. In addition to participating in class and speaking with me directly, I highly recommend students team up with their colleagues to study. Often times the people sitting around you in class can help give you tips and answer questions that you might otherwise feel shy or embarrassed to ask of your instructor. It may also help to look into getting a private tutor.

Try to keep yourself well-rested and pace yourself. Be sure to get enough sleep and come to your reading and studying when you're at your best and brightest. Also try not to multitask, but rather give your study time and the material you're engaging your full attention. This will increase your comprehension, retention, and creativity. The human mind does not work well when over-burdened with trying to juggle multiple tasks. If you need to do something, choose one thing, do it well, then move on to something else.

Also try to break up your studying with other activities rather than attempting to plow through it all at once. If you also find yourself feeling down or exhausted, try exercising, and in the winter months consider using a full-spectrum bulb or lightbox in your room. Be sure to take good care of your body by eating healthy foods (e.g., fruits, nuts, etc.) that pick you up rather than making you crash (e.g., sugar, carbs, etc.). Collectively, these can help increase your overall energy level as well as your understanding and retention of the material.

Method

Of course, the amount of time and effort one invests in studying is not the sole or necessarily even the prime determinant of success. The *quality* of your preparation matters considerably.

As a general guide, I recommend students spend an hour or two skimming readings assigned for the week. *Skimming* (or *pre-reading*) means briefly reviewing the introductory and closing paragraphs of a text, reading the first sentence of each paragraph, scanning for keywords and phrases, and noting any bulleted points, headings, and sub-headings (Note: skimming is a skill that is amply detailed in a number of published and readily available study aides and therefore need not be reiterated here. For those interested, however, please see the references listed in the appendix for further details). As should go without saying, it is best to complete *all* the readings, including any graphs or textboxes that might be included in textbooks. While skimming, try to understand any new terms or words the authors use that may be unfamiliar to you. Often times you can get a sense of what the words mean by the means and context in which they are used. If you don't understand certain terms or words, it is best to look them up.

After skimming the materials, take a few minutes (say about five or so) to identify the larger goal of what you've read, that is, what seems to be the larger purpose of the text. Sometimes this can be very general, sometimes more specific. But it helps to identify the larger goal of the readings so you have a sense of the author's larger argument and the general direction or purpose of the piece, and write this down so you can return to it and better remember it.

Some people naturally get more out of skimming than others. If, after skimming, you find yourself having difficulty understanding the material and pulling out the main points, you may wish to stop and go back and read the material more carefully.

Once you've gotten the larger argument or goal, it helps to then take a few minutes (say about an hour or so) to explore how any sections of subsections within a reading are used to support this goal. Do the same with any concepts, theories, arguments, or perspectives presented in the readings. Try to get a larger sense of what they're about as well as how they come together, how they inter-relate. This gives you a better command of the reading as you know now not only what the author is trying to say and why, but how they are going about saying it. This helps show you how different arguments, theories, and examples inter-relate and come together. Again, write this down so you can return to it and better remember it.

After getting this larger sense of the readings' goals and how the parts of the readings inter-relate, it helps to take some time (say about an hour or so) to jot down the defining features of any *major* concepts, theories, perspectives, or arguments discussed in the readings. Here underlining and highlighting and making notes in your readings can help tremendously, especially as I generally allow my students to bring and use their notes and textbooks. Don't try to memorize the materials or to write down every feature, just try to get the main two or three for each major concept, theory, or perspective to help you orient yourself. Again, write these down, or at the very least underline or highlight them in the readings so you can return to them later. You may also wish to translate the theories and their defining features into your own words, i.e., how you would explain the theory or perspective to someone else who is just like you.

As you go about identifying defining features, keep in mind that in the social sciences we operate with different assumptions and working definitions than in the life and physical sciences. Thus, as in real life, theorists might operate with different assumptions, different definitions of key terms, different takes on different theories or perspectives, etc. Part of the challenge to you is to develop a larger sense or understanding of what they are getting at, with the understanding that, as in real life, there may be some degree of overlap with different concepts, theories, or perspectives and things are rarely, if ever, concrete or clear-cut. New theories and perspectives are built largely in relation to others that already exist,

meaning they might take elements from some while discarding or ignoring aspects of others. Also, as in real life, there is no monopoly on what we call “definitions.” Just like in the dictionary, the terms we use often have multiple and contested meanings, each of which gets us different things. And often times authors don’t define terms in the “XYZ means ____” or “ABC refers to ____” manner, in part because such definitions may over-simplify or fail to capture more important and subtle nuances that the author wishes to convey. They may therefore allow definitions to *emerge* through larger discussions or descriptions meant to give a larger understanding than is possible with simple definitions. Again, the challenge to you is to really engage the material and get a larger sense of what they’re getting at, how they might be similar or different, and what some get us or explain that others don’t.

Once you have a larger grasp of the core defining features of the terms and theories or perspectives, try to identify similarities and differences between these (e.g., how different terms, theories, or approaches are similar to or different from others, such as their strengths and weaknesses relative to each other, how they ask different questions, how they have different underlying assumptions, etc.). Thinking about whether you agree or disagree with different theories and perspectives helps make it more memorable and can be very helpful too.

By now you should have a command of the readings. You don’t need to know them by heart or know their deepest intricacies, but you should know the larger goal of the readings, how they inter-relate, the defining features of the major terms, theories, arguments, and perspectives.

Now that you have command of the readings, spend some time identifying *connections* between the textbook readings and any supplementary readings (e.g., newspaper articles) that have been assigned. That is, take some time to *use and apply what you’ve learned*. You don’t have to micro-analyze every sentence or know every possible permutation of everything. Just get a larger sense of how things connect, how they relate. This challenges you to truly *understand* the material, not just to remember certain facts or figures, and helps you organize your understanding by discovering how they inter-relate and can be applied. Identify, for example, how they might ask similar or different questions, have similar or different assumptions, talk about similar or different topics, how someone from a particular theoretical perspective would address something in the supplementary readings, how one theory or perspective builds on or contrasts another, how a particular theory or perspective explains or sheds light on real world events, etc.

Application: A Brief Illustration

This process of connecting and applying theoretical perspectives from academic readings to real world events described in newspaper articles can be *briefly* illustrated. For example, in their chapter, “Rule Making, Rule Breaking, and Power,” Piven and Cloward (2005) offer their perspective on the relationship between power and rule making and rule breaking in society, saying that,

“The crux of our argument is that just as rule making is a strategy of domination, so is rule breaking a strategy in challenges to domination” (Piven and Cloward 2005: 33)

and that

...“Power is thus inextricably linked with conflict in actual social life, simply because social life implies zero-sum contests, whether, as in the Hobbesian example, because men and women compete over the same things or because they contest the terms and ends of cooperative efforts” (Piven and Cloward 2005: 36).

As noted by the authors identifying the “crux of our argument,” the larger goal of this text is to specify the relationship between power and rule making and rule breaking. From the authors’ explicitly stated material and use of words, we know that the authors’ theoretical scope includes topics of power, rule making, rule breaking, conflict, domination, and resistance and how these intersect.

The chapter includes sub-sections on “Definitions of Power” and “Interdependent Relations and Resources for Power” that are meant to support this goal by elaborating on what they mean by power and to explore how power is exercised in a manner that supports their theoretical perspective that

“People have potential power, the ability to make others do what they want, when those others depend on them for the contributions they make to the interdependent relations that are social life” (Piven and Cloward 2005: 39, italics in original).

Reviewing the article identifies these as major arguments of the piece as they are identified explicitly as the “crux of [the] argument” (Piven and Cloward 2005: 33) and are set off from the rest of the text with the use of italics. Not coincidentally, these excerpts are also found in the introductory remarks of the piece (for the first excerpt) and in the concluding remarks of one of the chapter’s major sections. The term “power” is also identified as a key concept, which is recognizable as a key concept by the authors using the term in one of their section headings, by their elaboration on the term in that section, and by the term being a key element of the “crux of [the] argument” (Piven and Cloward 2005: 33).

Having skimmed the chapter, and to better appreciate and orient oneself to Piven and Cloward’s perspective, the reader might then *interpret* the material so as to discern what kinds of questions someone from this theoretical perspective might ask. The chapter title and the explicit mention of the “The crux of [the] argument” being about “domination” and “challenges to domination” suggest, somewhat obviously, that the authors are interested in the larger questions of “How is power related to rule making and rule breaking?” and especially how these are related to domination and resistance. As power is a key element in the title, this may raise an additional question, such as “What is power?” which the authors make effort to define in their section on the “Definitions of Power.” From skimming the material, another question that may come to mind from this perspective is “How is power exercised?” as the authors talk about not only what “power” is, but also who wields it--e.g., when they say that “People have potential power” (Piven and Cloward 2005: 39) and when they consider the exercise of power being connected to both “interdependent relations” (p. 39) and to both the “strategy of domination” and to “challenges to domination” (Piven and Cloward 2005: 33). These concerns may generate additional questions like “What forms of power might different peoples have?” and “How might the people exercise any power they do have?” And, as domination and resistance are key themes of the piece, additional questions might be raised about “How might the state use rule making to exert dominance over a people?” or “How might the state resist the power of the people?” etc.¹

Thus, as illustrated briefly above, this process requires active interpretation, for which it helps to have a sense of the author’s larger goal and scope. To generate questions like these from a theory or theoretical perspective that one might then be able to actively use, it helps to draw upon the author’s goal and the author’s statements (generally made through declarative sentences) and to then rephrase or reformulate these as questions, as shown above. This helps to further identify the author’s goal or scope (or that of a

¹ Note that my purpose here is not to attempt to evaluate or answer these questions, or to show how this may be done, as space limits are constraining, but rather to show how such questions may be generated and to suggest that the greater utility of generating such questions is that of helping the reader orient himself or herself to the theory or theoretical perspective in question. While it is well beyond present purposes, answering such questions can, however, be of use to the reader interested in developing an even deeper appreciation of a theory’s strengths and weaknesses.

theory, were we looking in this brief example at a more formal theory), but this also gives the reader a means to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the material. A strong theory can be said to be one that helps to explain and may even predict real world events. A strong theory can also be said to be one that, relative to its goal and scope, effectively answers and helps provide an explanation for any questions the author state's explicitly, but that also helps to address questions that the reader may ask of the author's material, drawing on the questions the reader has generated and that are grounded by the author's or the theory's driving goal or scope. Identifying the strengths of a given theory or theoretical perspective not only helps one to better understand it, but also makes the material an active tool, something that the reader can then find greater value in because it has transformed into something he or she can use to explain or predict real world events.

Having skimmed the chapter, identifying its defining argument(s), key concepts, and questions someone might ask from this theoretical perspective, the reader can then go on to apply this theoretical perspective, in the manner described above, to real world events described in a newspaper article.

You can find a suitable real world event to which to apply this material in newspaper articles describing events that have a scope that *aligns* well with the scope of the scholarly material we're using. This can be identified in a number of ways, such as both talking about or involving similar processes or dynamics, similar populations, similar contexts, and even similar use of keywords by author's of the scholarly piece and of any newspaper article to which you may wish to apply it. The greater the alignment between the texts and event, the more applicable will be the theory or theoretical perspective in question. Thus, for example, a real world event that involved the making or breaking of rules (as laws and lawmaking are also a form of rule making and can involve rule breaking, suitable examples may also include instances of political corruption, law makers creating new laws, citizens lobbying to overturn existing laws, etc.) would be considerably more appropriate than a real world event that involved no rule making or breaking.

An article detailing some of the dynamics surrounding the challenge to the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy provides a useful example. In his article published on the CNN website, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell: The Reality of Repeal," writer Ed Hornick (2010) briefly outlines the history of the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy, noting, for example, how a "Pentagon report finds that repealing 'don't ask, don't tell' wouldn't hurt the military" (Hornick 2010) and "those in favor of repeal say the answers are clear" while "opponents say there are still a lot of questions that need to be answered" (Hornick 2010).

Some of the strengths of Piven and Cloward's article are evident in how their arguments can be used to help explain and account for some of the dynamics described in Hornick's article. Rule-making, in Piven and Cloward's perspective, can be a strategy of domination, and from this perspective the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy can be interpreted as one of many means to exert domination over members of the GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered) community as it elevates and normalizes heterosexuality (e.g., making it appear normal and acceptable) while denigrating homosexuality (e.g., by making it appear abnormal and by imposing rules and punishments against those who are homosexual for breaking the law). The law, and Hornick mentions in his article, outlawed members of the GLBT community from serving openly in the military, outlawing marriages between GLBT couples, and provided strict punishments for those caught in homosexual activities. This use of rule-making can be interpreted, among other things, as helping to create, recreate, and perpetuate a power imbalance between heterosexuals and homosexuals as, among other things, the policy helped to place heterosexuals in a position of power (or at least to consolidate and extend this position of power from the civilians to the military realm) from which heterosexuals were then better able to dictate norms and standards of what constitutes acceptable sexual practice and loving expression.

These interpretations and lines of thinking is necessarily incomplete, but it helps to illustrate how Piven and Cloward's perspective draws our attention to rule-making as an instrument of domination, but their perspective has the added bonus of also taking into account the possibility of resistance. Challenges to the law can take many forms, including, for example, deliberately violating the law as well as challenges to overturn the law itself.

Challenges to the Don't Ask policy may be interpreted as challenges to this power imbalance because those who sought to overturn Don't Ask, as mentioned in the article, were seeking to be treated more fairly and equally so as to have many of the same rights and privileges that accorded to heterosexuals, such as the right to marry whomever they liked, to not be dishonorably discharged for their sexuality, etc.

Furthermore, as described elsewhere in Hornick's article, those who sought to overturn Don't Ask can be argued to have had some potential power of their own originating from the interdependent relations of which they were a part, as "those in favor of changing the law point out that U.S. troops are already serving with NATO troops who are openly gay," (Hornick 2010) which suggests that those working to repeal Don't Ask had the potential power of *precedence* upon which they could potentially build an argument in favor of repeal as this suggests that "concerns over unit cohesion are unfounded" (Hornick 2010). Other sources of potential power can potentially be identified in the article and in other events surrounding the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell, but this brief interpretation helps to illustrate, much as Piven and Cloward suggested, that "*People have potential power... when those others depend on them for the contributions they make to the interdependent relations that are social life.*" Thus, both support for and resistance to the law can both be accounted for in Piven and Cloward's theoretical perspective on rule-making and rule-breaking.

Additional illustrations of the potential strength of Piven and Cloward's work can be found in applying the questions one may ask of the theorists' work to real world events like this. For example, one question I generated from the authors' scope was "How is power exercised?" and, much like Piven and Cloward suggested, I found that the exercise of power was indeed a two-way street, meaning that there was both domination and resistance, upon which people indeed had potential power based in part on social interdependencies. This is, of course, only one interpretive illustration (which seems to support Piven and Cloward's perspective), but it helps to illustrate the larger utility of generating such questions that one may ask of a theory or a theorist's perspective. Had I not bothered to ask questions of the work, I may not appreciate the work or find any value in it, and I could have missed an opportunity to add one more tool into my sociological perspective.

Many other interpretations of the events described in the article are of course possible, each of which may lend or retract support for Piven and Cloward's theoretical perspective. The analytical interpretation can also be taken considerably further, and Piven and Cloward's perspective can be applied to still other events and dynamics well beyond the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy. While an exploration of these myriad alternatives is well beyond the scope of this document, this example helps to briefly illustrate a means by which theories and theoretical perspectives can be applied to real world events so as to better understand those events and to appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of a given theory or perspective (Readers seeking a more complete illustration than is possible here are highly encouraged to obtain and read copies of Piven and Cloward's chapter as well as Hornick's article, see references below for further details).

Some Additional Thoughts

My tests are primarily *applied* and *conceptual* and require students to demonstrate their *comprehension* of and the ability to *use* the materials we cover. This means I tend to test at a level that is different than some courses in that my students are typically not tested on memory and the ability to recall particular names,

facts, figures, or definitions, but rather to demonstrate a *larger understanding* of concepts, theories, and approaches by demonstrating the ability to identify how they *inter-relate*, their *strengths and weaknesses*, and how they may or may not *apply* to real world processes and problems. This means that students who attempt to plumb the deepest intricacies or particularities of a theory, concept, argument, etc. are likely studying too narrowly for my exams and should instead focus on grasping the larger concepts, themes, arguments, and perspectives as well as their inter-relatedness, similarities, differences, and real world applications.

My class lectures, activities, discussions, and assignments are cumulatively designed to help teach students how to apply theory and draw connections as described above in order to help them understand and process the material we cover as well as to prepare them for the tests. Thus, while students are generally not asked the same questions as those we've already answered in class, exam questions challenge students with many of the same types of questions and call upon students to use the same skills that we develop in class and with the homework assignments. In this way students are tested in the same manner in which they are taught, and they are exposed to the same material multiple times (in class, in the homework, in the readings, etc.), helping to hone their cognitive skills and active knowledge as well as helping to solidify what we've learned in the course. This ability to draw connections and apply learning demonstrates true understanding and is a skill that will aid students in other courses and in life beyond the university.

Test question types

My tests questions are typically multiple-choice, true/false, or matching, often drawing upon the following types of questions:

Hypothetical scenarios.

Identify a statement with which a theorist from a particular camp or perspective would most likely agree or disagree.

Identify a major strength or weakness of particular theories, approach, or argument.

Identify the commentary or explanation of a given real world event that a theorist from a particular camp or theoretical perspective might make.

Identify an instance or example of a particular concept, argument, or perspective in a real world event.

Questions a theorist from a particular camp or perspective might ask (i.e., questions they might ask generally, or of a particular event).

How someone might study a particular event from a particular perspective or methodological approach.

Points of similarity or disagreement between readings, or between theorists from particular camps or perspectives.

True or false statements.

Synthesis of different theories or perspectives (e.g., if these two were combined, they might argue ____; or if these two were combined, they might say ____ about a given real world event).

Difficulties synthesizing theories or perspectives (e.g., if these two were combined, they might argue ____, but this would leave larger problems about how to resolve ____ because of their contrasting assumptions or positions about the importance of ____).

References

- Hornick, Ed. 2010. “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell: The Reality of Repeal.” CNN, December 2. Retrieved December 2, 2010 from:
<http://www.cnn.com/2010/POLITICS/12/02/dadt.future.questions/index.html>
- Piven, Frances Fox and Richard A. Cloward. 2005. “Rule Making, Rule Breaking, and Power.” Pp. 33-53 in Janoski, Thomas, Robert R. Alford, Alexander M. Hicks, Mildred A. Schwartz, eds., *The Handbook of Political Sociology: States, Civil Societies, and Globalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Appendix

For Further Reading

For greater detail on skills like skimming, and for other useful study tactics and strategies, please see the following study aides:

Adler, Mortimer J. and Charles Van Doren. 1972. *How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading*. New York, NY: Touchstone.

Muchnick, Cynthia C. 2011. *The Everything Guide to Study Skills: Strategies, Tips, and Tools You Need to Succeed in School!* Avon, MA: Adams Media.

Newport, Cal. 2006. *How to Become a Straight-A Student: The Unconventional Strategies Real College Students Use to Score High While Studying Less*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.

Preparation Checklist

___ Self-monitor your reading and study habits. Look for patterns in your past performance. Identify and exploit your strengths and investigate ways to compensate for your weaknesses.

___ Be sure to actively participate in class every day. Share your opinions and be sure to ask questions.

___ Keep yourself organized and on schedule. Allot an appropriate amount of time to study and review.

___ Keep yourself well-rested and do not put things off until the last minute. Finish your readings, assignments, projects, papers, etc., ahead of time whenever possible.

___ Skim any assigned readings, then take a moment to go back and review. Define the major concepts and take some time to think through the goals of the readings and how they inter-relate.

___ Take some time to identify the similarities and differences between the major concepts or theories presented in the readings.

___ Draw connections between the readings. Identify, for example, where they talk about similar dynamics, have similar assumptions, how they ask similar questions, etc.

___ Think about how what you've read applies to the real world. Ask yourself, for example, how you might explain the real events you've read about if you were a theorist from a particular theoretical perspective.

Student Study Habits Assessment for Applied and Conceptual Exams

Having trouble with how you prepare for your applied or conceptual exams? Looking for some hints to do even better? If so, this informal self-assessment may help you identify potential problem areas to address. You can use this assessment in private to shape your study activities, or you may discuss using it with the help of your instructors to further guide and refine your study habits.

True False

- | | | |
|-------|-------|--|
| _____ | _____ | 1. Whenever material seems confusing or unclear, I make sure to ask questions about it of my fellow classmates and/or the instructor (e.g., in class, during office hours, etc.). |
| _____ | _____ | 2. I have created a daily schedule to organize my time and I follow this schedule very closely. |
| _____ | _____ | 3. I attend and actively pay attention and participate in all my classes. |
| _____ | _____ | 4. I complete all the assigned readings, including any supplementary materials and accompanying textboxes, graphs, diagrams, etc. |
| _____ | _____ | 5. I have collected exams, assignments, projects, and papers I have completed in the past and reviewed them to identify larger patterns in the areas I tend to do better in as well as those with which I tend to have difficulty. |
| _____ | _____ | 6. I spend an appropriate amount of time studying each week (e.g., 2 to 3 hours of study time per hour of class each week). |
| _____ | _____ | 7. I bring my questions and requests for help to the attention of my instructors in a timely manner (e.g., several days ahead of time for smaller assignments or several weeks for larger projects and exams). |
| _____ | _____ | 8. I pace myself and keep myself healthy and well-rested. |
| _____ | _____ | 9. I strategize and rank order how much time I spend on different activities. |
| _____ | _____ | 10. Rather than trying to go it alone, I team up with other students or enlist the help of a tutor to help my better understand class materials and to prepare for exams. |
| _____ | _____ | 11. I do not procrastinate and I try whenever possible to complete assignments, projects, papers, etc., ahead of time. |
| _____ | _____ | 12. I skim the readings, then I go back and more carefully review anything that seems unclear. |
| _____ | _____ | 13. I take the time to define in my own words any new or unfamiliar concepts or theories. |
| _____ | _____ | 14. I identify the goal(s) and/or scope of the assigned readings so that I have a good sense of the author's purpose. |

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| _____ | _____ | 15. After completing the readings, I go back and think through how they might inter-relate (e.g., how they may talk about similar ideas or dynamics, how one may build on the other, etc.) |
| _____ | _____ | 16. I identify the major strengths and weaknesses of major theories presented in the readings (i.e., what they account for or explain, what they fail to account for or explain, etc.) |
| _____ | _____ | 17. I take time to apply or connect the assigned readings to real world events. I ask myself, for example, how a particular theorist might use their ideas to explain real world events, how a theory might fail to address certain aspects of events, etc. |
| _____ | _____ | 18. I identify and think through questions that different theorists might ask or that someone using a given theory or perspective might ask. |
| _____ | _____ | 19. I take the time to identify important similarities and differences between different concepts, theories, and perspectives presented in class and in assigned readings. |
| _____ | _____ | 20. I have put forth my best effort in completing assignments and projects and in preparing for exams. |
| _____ | _____ | 21. I have obtained copies of the study aides recommended above put forth my best effort in using them. |
| _____ | _____ | 22. I have sought help and otherwise made a good personal effort to address potential problem areas identified by each of the above questions to which I have answered "false." |

Next Steps

Congratulations on completing the assessment! You have made a good investment in yourself and are well on your way to improving your performance. Good job!

Now that you have completed the assessment, please take a moment to review and reflect on your responses. Do you see areas where you might improve? How you answered the questions above can be considered a type of "self-portrait" of your strengths (reflected in those responses to which you answered "true") and areas where you can improve (reflected in those responses to which you answered "false") as a student preparing for applied and conceptual exams.

Congratulate yourself on those to which you have answered "true" and recognize these are strengths you can build upon. Also be sure to seek help and otherwise make a good personal effort to address potential problem areas identified by each of the above questions to which you have answered "false." These are areas where you can improve, and having now identified them, you are well on your way!

You may wish to review your responses with your instructors to refine your study habits. You may also like to periodically re-take this assessment to gauge how changes in your study habits affect your exam performance.