



Making And Using Study Guides-Aids To Preparing For An Exam

Introduction

The purpose of a study guide is to help you synthesize and summarize the information. You might think of your study guide as a mini outline. It is especially useful for difficult or complex concepts or subject areas. The primary advantage of a study guide is that it reduces the amount of information to be learned. Also, memory is improved by putting the information in your own words and organizing it in ways that are meaningful to you. In this chapter we will study several methods of organizing information and look at their advantages and disadvantages. You may use more than one organizing strategy when composing a study guide. Remember MASTERY of a SMALLER amount of information is your goal.

Types of Information Organizers

Summary Sheet

This is the most common method of organizing information. You simply summarize the underlining and marking both in your text and in your lecture notes. It is important to use titles that will organize the material in ways meaningful to you. Then in your own words list the most important facts under each title. At this point in your study process, you should be able to use key words--either in the text or the margin--that will trigger recall without needing a full written explanation.

Advantages And Disadvantages: There are several advantages and disadvantages to using a summary sheet. It is probably the most thorough method of organizing information and the one with which we are most familiar. It allows you to include examples and note relationships. Thus you can study at a deep level. By using a left hand margin similar to the Cornell method, you can also predict questions and rehearse answers. There are disadvantages, however. This method is more time consuming and often you are tempted to include more detail than may be necessary.

Concept Map or Graphic Overview

If you learn best from visual representations, this may be the best method for you. Arrange a chapter's titles and subtitles using geometric shapes such as circles, squares, triangles, radiating lines and arrows to place information in a meaningful pattern. Graphic overviews can also be prepared for sections within a chapter.

Advantages And Disadvantages: The relationship and organization of various concepts becomes apparent when looking at a graphic overview. It is also easy to test yourself on the vocabulary or key words. However, it often takes several pages to include all the key words in a chapter and very little detail is included.

Predicting Essay Questions

One advantage of essay exams is that you will be tested on the major concepts. Thus it is relatively easy to predict the types of questions you will be asked. Using common essay question words such as define, contrast, and prove, you can link the subheadings together and accurately predict exam questions.

Advantages And Disadvantages: By writing and mastering the answers at home, you can go to the exam confident that you will be able to answer similar questions during the exam.

Index Cards

Index cards are an efficient means of organizing information that can be written in a straightforward manner. Examples include definitions of terms, brief facts or charts, mathematical formulas, and foreign language vocabulary. Index cards are very easy to make and a few could even be made after reading a chapter. First, write the title or topic on the blank side. Then write the information to be learned on the back or lined side of the card, preferably upside-down so it is easy to read when the card is turned. You may even include a brief example on the back of the card. If you number the cards, be sure that you mix them up during your final review session(s) to test recall and understanding.

Advantages And Disadvantages: There are several advantages to index cards. First, you will, of course, learn by making the cards. Even more importantly, testing yourself by reciting from the topic on the front of the card is an excellent way of discovering how well you truly know or understand the information. Secondly, index cards are especially easy to carry and use during short free periods waiting in line or between classes. Finally, index cards are time efficient in that you can separate the cards you have learned from those you still need to practice. Don't forget, however, that you may still need to quickly review the "learned" cards at intervals. The primary disadvantage is that you tend to learn information only at the literal or definition level.

Other Study Aids

Old Exams

Old exams are one of the best ways to test your grasp of the information. They are usually written at a deeper level of difficulty than study guides that you create. Also they give you experience in taking a test using "real" examples. This process often exposes concepts that are still unclear or fuzzy. You must be cautious in using old exams to the exclusion of other study aids. The range of examples is limited so that studying and knowing the examples on one test does not insure that you will do well on a test that focuses on alternate concepts. Taking old tests can also be a time consuming process. However the combination of studying all the target material and then taking an old exam can be a very effective.

Commercial Study Guides

Many publishers also print study guides to accompany the textbook. They can shortcut your task of summarizing the information after studying the text.

Types of Information Organizers	Advantages	Disadvantages
Summary Sheet	Predicts questions Rehearse easily Encourage easily Encourages deeper level thinking	Time consuming More detail
Concept Map	See vocabulary easily Shows organization Shows relationships	More than 1 needed to cover all material
Index Cards	Mixes ideas easily Easily portable Easy to test Separate learned ideas	One card for each concept May tend to be literal
Predicting Essay Questions	Most closely resembles task in exam	
Other Study Aids		
Other Study Aids	Deeper level/difficulty Real examples Tells you what you still don't know	
Commercial Study Guides	Publisher has done much of the work for you	Cannot substitute for task of reading and understanding textbook