

We've all heard it before: don't cram. Don't wait for the last minute. You won't retain as much, you'll tire yourself out and it just won't work. It's far better to develop strong daily study habits that'll keep you revisiting material often, and without the stress.

This is all excellent advice. It's also advice that I never followed, not once in the whole length of my college career. Instead, I developed ways to be an excellent last-minute studier, and not only did I graduate college, I managed to make the Dean's Honor list a few times.

Based on what I learned, here's a few tips to help you discover how to study for a test at the last minute, and optimize those few, precious hours before a big test.

If you know your study habits suck, don't miss class. Okay, so if you're the type of person who doesn't have good study habits, you may not have good class-attending habits, either. But if you can make yourself go to class on a regular basis, you won't have to study nearly as much, and you'll have a good idea of what to expect on tests.

Cram with others (especially if you've missed class). Being somewhat antisocial, I didn't learn the value of group study until I was well into my junior year, but everything they say about it really is true. You will remember more from a group study session because it's more like a social conversation - watching and listening to other people in an interactive environment will make things stick more than reading them on your own.

If you're a class skipper, you can also glean from the people who have been faithfully attending. However, if you do this, always be thankful and don't do it often - people who work hard will soon get fed up with your mooching!

Make flash cards - and use them correctly. As a quick learning tool, flashcards are a lifesaver, but only if you use them well. The big mistake I see people making with them is to just run through them incessantly, continuously reviewing cards they know while repeatedly drawing a blank on the ones they don't know.

Try this instead: go through your stack and remove the cards that you know. Continue going through the remaining cards and removing them as you get them right until there are no cards left. Rinse and repeat. Also, if the stack of cards you don't know is huge, break it up into manageable sections, then combine the smaller decks as you master them. Ideally, you should be able to go through your cards and get everything right on the first try, then put the cards away for a little while, then come back and do it again.

Write song lyrics. Music has an extraordinary power to stick in our heads, because it connects more deeply with different parts of the brain. This is why we all sing the alphabet song when we're trying to organize files in the right order.

Just take a tune you know, any tune at all, and make up new lyrics for it using the information you need to remember. It doesn't have to be good, you just have to be able to sing it to yourself

until you remember it. Once you can do that, you won't forget it.

Use silly, abstract memory triggers. Another great trick that's worth the silliness is to come up with any kind of weird mental story or picture that'll cement concepts in your head, or connect one thing to another.

For example: when I was seven, my mother taught me this trick as I was learning to identify the 50 U.S. States. She pointed to the edge of Idaho and observed that it looked a bit like an old man's face, maybe even that of Santa Claus, which would help me remember the state's name because...Idaho-ho-ho.

This sort of thing seemed embarrassingly silly to me, even as a seven-year-old. But it really, really works.

Take breaks.

You may think that with only a few hours before the big moment, you've got no time to lose. However, you'll get much, much more out of the time you spend studying if you take breaks and distract yourself. I recommend the occasional 15 minute break every couple of hours or so, and if you can, play a little video game or watch something short and entertaining on your favorite video sites. Things like this are immensely refreshing. But avoid chatting with friends during these breaks - it's far too easy to get caught up in a long conversation and lose track of time.

Don't lose sleep - much.

Along similar lines, all-nighters are likely to cause your brain so much stress and exhaustion that you not only forget everything you've learned, you don't have the mental capacity to properly read, write, spell, or fill in little circles. A far better bet is to get started studying as early as possible, stay up late, get a few hours of sleep, then wake up early and get another hour or two in just before the test (which you can now take with a somewhat fresh mind). Having a little sleep between these two study periods will also give you a great chance to find out which things you've retained from the studying the night before, and to brush up on the ones you haven't.

Eat. Being hungry triggers stress, which makes it very hard to think and remember things. Snacking lightly while studying will not only make the experience more enjoyable, it'll make it more effective.

More importantly, have breakfast before the test, or whatever meal comes right before. Take your study materials with you if you have to. Avoid too much starch and sugar, and be sure to have lots of protein.