Preparing for and Taking J.R.'s Exams

My exams are great fun. Ha! Despite the multiple choice format most students find them quite challenging. There's no ceiling on my exams, meaning no one has ever gotten 100%. I don't expect this. I present a lot of information, so if a student manages to retain better than 90% of it I think that's more than adequate, and so should you. That's why I grade on a curve. Also remember that I'm not all that concerned with individual test scores, but on total points in the class. If you don't score as well as you'd have liked to on an exam, you can compensate by doing well on the other exams, as well as the essays and quizzes. And of course, there's also the option of doing extra credit assignments. So anyway, here are a few pointers on how to prepare for and take my exams.

Preparing for the Exams:

The best advise I can supply for preparing is the three S's: Sort, Study, and Sleep. These are the three most important things.

Sort - Organize the material to be studied. There is a priority hierarchy involved. Of first priority is anything mentioned in both the lecture and the textbook. Be able to recognize the really big names and landmark studies. However, my main concern is you know what they discovered and the implications of those discoveries. Your second priority is what's mentioned solely in lecture (unit handouts). Lectures go beyond the book, embedding and adding things I think are important and which I may be rather uniquely qualified to discuss. That's why you're here. Otherwise you could just sit at home and read the book. So remember that this is stuff I thought important enough to add, uniquely based upon my experience and way of looking at the science of psychology. In other words, consider the textbook a supplement to lectures, not the other way around. Often texts will over-simplify, especially in areas the authors aren't particularly well versed in themselves. Lecture material should be held above the textbook if there is a discrepancy. Remember I'm writing both the lectures and the exams. And third priority items include anything else presented as part of the class. That means things mentioned in the textbook, but not discussed in lecture (unless I specifically said not to bother with it). The idea is that some things are pretty basic. So if I feel it's something you can easily grasp I may not lecture on it specifically. If it's in the book, then it is fair game for exam questions. That also holds true for other material such as specific articles I may hand out, the syllabus, essay assignment sheets, quiz answers, and anything else you receive as part of the class. Don't ignore anything unless I specifically say you should not bother with it for the exam.

One organized spend most of your study time on the higher priority items. It's a good idea to go over those both at the beginning and end of each study session. This will help to take advantage of what memory researchers call primacy and recency effects.

Study - Take frequent breaks and study over several sessions. Memory research calls this distributed practice. An all night jam session cramming for an exam is not the best way to study, you simply don't retain as much. How many times have you been powering through a book chapter when you suddenly realized that you had no idea what was on the last few pages you read? Breaks allow the brain to interpret the information, to compare and tie it to information you already have, and to set up a conceptual framework to understand it better. All of these factors lead to better memory retention.

When studying always consider underlying processes. This will help put a particular phenomenon in a broader perspective, aiding both understanding and remembering it. Also consider purpose, "What good is something, why has it been selected for by nature?" Understanding purpose aids in general understanding. Often my exam questions are aimed at these aspects, not specifics.

It also helps to study at different times and under a variety of conditions. That way what you learn is not dependent on any particular cues for recall. And studying with someone else is helpful. Not only can the other person help explain things you don't understand well, you can do the same for them. And explaining a concept to someone else forces you to organize your thoughts in order to articulate it. The end result is that you come to better understand it yourself.

Above all, study a lot. The better prepared you are, the more confident and relaxed you'll be taking the exam. If you're assured that you know the stuff, you won't be freaking out over taking an exam. So you'll be in an optimal state of arousal. That leads to optimal performance.

Sleep - Believe it or not, getting enough sleep may be the most important factor in performing well on an exam. Sleep deprivation impairs concentration, reasoning, and memory. Those are all crucial to doing well on

an exam. No amount of caffeine will adequately compensate for a lack of sleep. So if your considering whether to cut your sleep time the night before an exam in order to get in a few more hours of last minute studying, don't do it. The deficits in performance will wipe out any gains from the extra studying. And adequate sleep is necessary for incorporating things into your memory, so you're not all that likely to retain the material from that last minute session anyway. Keep in mind that if you've attended class regularly and have put in a good amount of prior study time, then you should already remember a good deal of information. You're better off getting a good night's sleep so you can readily access what you already know rather than trying to cram in more information at the eleventh hour.

Taking the Exams:

The exams themselves are actually designed to optimize your performance. All the questions are multiple choice, as recognition is the easiest form of recall. I reserve essays for take home assignments so as to get an example of your best writing, not something hastily put together under time constraints during an exam. You have the whole class period to take the exams, way more than a minute per question. I don't scramble the questions, they're in the same order as the lecture topics as this may aid in recall. I avoid questions that rely on some form of twisted logic in order to trip you up. So there won't be questions like, "Which of the following is an exception to the rule that a good theory should not be immune from possible ways of being proven not to be correct?" And comical answer options are employed whenever possible to lighten things up. The idea is that snickering at one of my attempts at humor is incompatible with being stressed out over taking an exam thus reducing your arousal level to an optimal performance state. Finally, I even allow students to go to the bathroom if they need to during the exams.

There is a strategy to answering questions. Remember that the instructions tell you to "... select the one BEST answer from the choices...". This has several connotations. It implies accuracy, of course. However, it should be able to withstand further challenges beyond mere accuracy or correctness. The best answer should encompass as much as possible with the least number of necessary assumptions. When considering multiple choice options, the first possibly correct answer may not be the BEST answer. You may find both options A and B are correct. Examine the other options. Does one of them encompass what both A and B are expressing? That may ultimately be the BEST answer. Perhaps A and B are the only two correct options. However, does one of them provide a greater depth of coverage than the other (better explain the phenomena in question, or address more vital aspects of it)? Then that would be the BEST answer. On the other hand, both A and B may be equally encompassing, but one of them requires you to buy into a greater number of assumptions. According to the principle of parsimony, in such instances it is best to go with the simplest option that still provides an acceptable answer to the question. For example, if A provides a correct answer in terms of metaphysical forces and demonic possession while B does the same but in terms of biochemistry, choose B. Finally, if you haven't figured it out yet, it is important to examine all the options. Do not simply pick the first correct one you encounter, it may be technically correct, but not the BEST answer.

How to deal with questions where you just don't have much of an idea as to the answer. There are ways to narrow the field of choices. Eliminate the comical option if there is one, and anything else you're sure does not apply. Eliminate terms you've never heard or seen before, they're mostly likely not the answer. Try to remember the context in which the topic was discussed. Look to other questions for clues. And if nothing else, guess. There's no extra penalty for incorrect responses. But unless you later have a flash of insight or find something in another question, stick with your original guess. There may have been some degree of recall, perhaps unconscious, that caused you to make that guess in the first place.

I advise marking all your answers on the test booklet first. Only when you're finished should you transcribe them to the answer sheet. That helps avoid problems that arise from erasing responses on the answer sheets (partial erasures are recorded as incorrect responses). This also helps avoid confusion if you skip a difficult question. People often end up either forgetting to come back to that question or marking the answer sheet out of sequence if they fill out the answer sheet as they go. And while you're transcribing you're also reviewing your answers once last time. Finally, it gives you a little extra time. Although not a problem with my exams, this trick might help in another class where the exams are rigidly timed. And of course, take advantage of the fact that you have plenty of time and use it.