FIRST SEMESTER · WEEK 15 STUDY GUIDE · STUDY SKILLS

Finals Preparation

Finals reward the habits you built all term. A backward plan, real practice tests and sleep turn those habits into points.

AFTER THIS GUIDE YOU CAN

- Build a two week backward plan for finals.
- Use practice exams and error review.
- Manage time and nerves during the exam.
- Know the logistics before exam day.

Key terms

Backward planning	Starting from the exam date and working back to set what to do each day.
Cumulative exam	A final that covers the whole course, not only the last unit.
Practice exam	A timed test under exam conditions, used to find weak spots.
Error review	Going through every miss to find why: knowledge gap, misread, or careless slip.
Traffic light topics	Marking each topic red (weak), yellow (shaky) or green (strong) to decide where to study.
Summary sheet	One page per topic you write from memory, then check against your notes.
Time budget	Planning minutes per section based on the points it is worth.
Test anxiety	Worry and body tension before or during a test that can crowd out thinking.
Slow breathing	Breathing out longer than in for a minute or two to calm the body.
Exam logistics	Date, time, room, what you may bring, and the policy for missing an exam.

The big ideas

- Start about two weeks out. List every topic and mark it red, yellow or green.
- Study red topics first, using retrieval and mixed practice.
- Take at least one full practice exam under time, then review every miss.
- Sleep is a study tool. Protect it most in the last three nights.
- On the exam, read everything first, budget time by points, do the easy questions first, and flag hard ones to return to.
- Nerves are normal. Slow breathing and calling the feeling "ready energy" can help you think clearly.

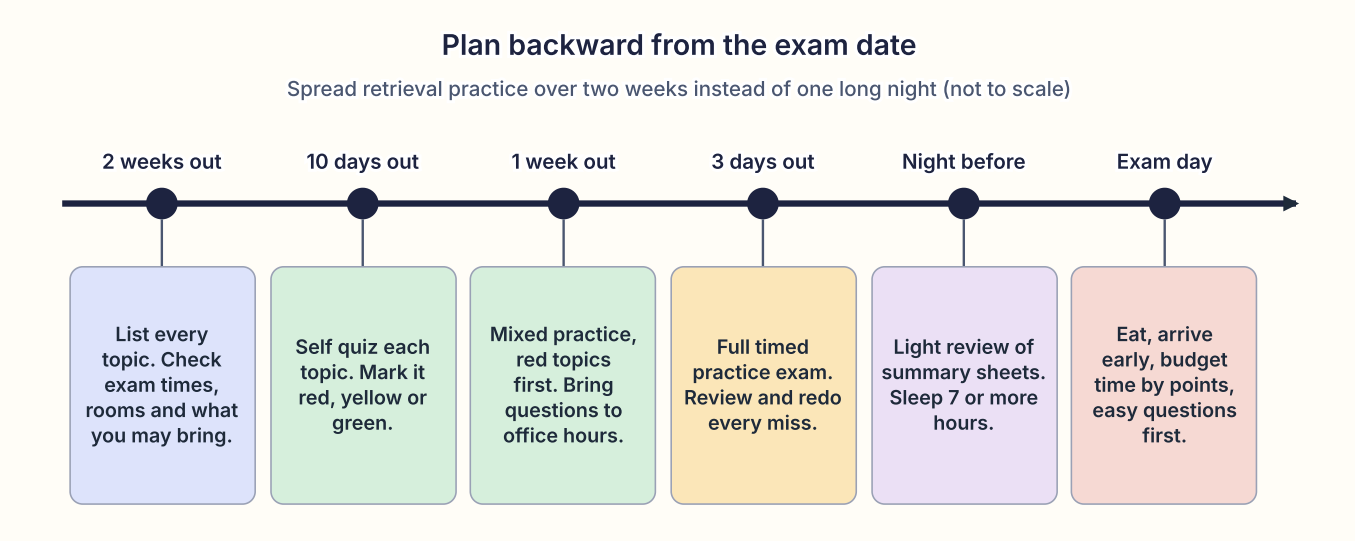

Figure. A backward plan for finals.

Worked example

Week 15 in the Great Hall. Finals in Biology, Math and the First Year Seminar fall Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. It is two weeks out.

1. Day 14: list the topics for all three courses, check every exam time and room, and note what you may bring.
2. Days 13 to 8: self quiz each topic; mark Biology metabolism red and Math limits yellow. Red topics go first each day.
3. Day 7: visit office hours with two specific questions on metabolism.
4. Day 3: take a full timed Biology practice exam, review every miss, and redo those questions the next day.
5. Night before each exam: light review of summary sheets and a normal bedtime. Exam morning: breakfast, arrive early, budget the time.

Common mistakes

- Starting to study for finals in the final week.
- Spending time on green topics because they feel good.
- Taking practice tests but never reviewing the misses.
- Pulling an all nighter before an exam.
- Getting stuck on one hard question and running out of time.

Check yourself

1. About how far ahead should finals prep start?
2. What do red, yellow and green mean in traffic light topics?
3. Why take a practice exam under time?
4. Name the three kinds of errors to look for in an error review.
5. A section is worth 40 percent of the points. How much time should it get?
6. What should you do with a hard question you cannot answer?
7. Name one quick strategy for test nerves.
8. What should you check before exam day?

Answer key

1. **About two weeks.** Time for spaced, mixed practice.
2. **Weak, shaky and strong.** Study red first.
3. **To find weak spots and practice pacing.** It rehearses the real conditions.
4. **Knowledge gap, misreading, careless slip.** Each has a different fix.
5. **About 40 percent of the time.** Budget time by points.
6. **Flag it, move on, and come back.** Easy points first.
7. **Slow breathing, or reframing the feeling as readiness.** Both calm the body.
8. **Date, time, room, allowed materials and the missed exam policy.** No surprises on the day.

Help is real. If you or a friend are struggling, talk to your campus counseling center. In the United States you can call or text 988 (Suicide and Crisis Lifeline) any time. Outside the US, contact your local crisis line.

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