

Preparing and taking sociology exams: A brief guide¹

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For most of you, this is probably the first sociology course you've ever taken (congrats!) This guide will help you make the most of your preparation for midterm and final exams in sociology, as well as give you a few pointers to remember during the exam.

1. Understand the concepts (this is where many students stop).

So you walked out of lecture understanding everything on the slides and in the readings? Great. Just don't stop there; sociology isn't a learn-it-once-and-done subject. A lot of the concepts we learn are new, a little different from what you might be used to (social construction anyone?), and often complicated. Be sure to fully grasp a concept by following the next steps:

2. Explain the concept to a friend using your own words.

They say teaching is the best way to learn something; so take your newfound sociological knowledge and share it with a friend, parent, or even just the mirror. Be sure you can **describe and explain** it fully – not just part way. And to help explain it... (see next tip)

3. Apply the concept to real life.

The best way to understand a concept (I mean *really* understand it), is to use an example. We've discussed several examples of major concepts in class, so you can use those or—even better—come up with an example of your own. That really shows mastery of a subject.

4. Know how concepts are related.

Sociology is full of paired concepts (think: positivism and interpretivism; structure and agency; sacred and profane). Compare and contrast concept pairs, making sure to carefully define all terms. Concepts also go together in overarching ways, like social norms, deviance, social constructionism and gender. Be sure to understand how concepts work together; you could even make a concept map/tree to help with studying.

5. Be precise and explicit.

It's not enough to know that the sick role is basically what gets you out of class when you're sick. The devil is in the details, and it's precisely in that nuance where a lot of the magic happens. For example, Parsons explicitly described the sick role as being *temporary* – something we occupy briefly to excuse us from our other roles. The fact that it's temporary, however, has drawn vociferous critique from scholars who point out that not all sickness is temporary (e.g. chronic illness). Be sure to know more than just the general gist of each concept if you want to get full points on an exam.

6. Practice summarizing readings to yourself/to others.

To prepare for an exam, go through each of the readings and practice putting together bullet-point summaries of the main takeaway points. (*Hint: it can help to look at the article abstract or subheaders when preparing summaries*)

¹ Adapted from <https://thesocietypages.org/sociologysource/2012/09/24/how-should-i-prepare-for-my-sociology-test/> and <http://www.everydaysociologyblog.com/2016/10/tips-on-successfully-taking-exams-in-sociology.html>

7. During the exam:

- a) Read. Every. Word. Of. Each. Question. Twice. Make sure you answer the question as it's being asked (see also e) below)
- b) Make an outline before writing short essays; jot down all the important points you want to get to, and then combine them into a coherent essay.
- c) Use definitions from the multiple choice section to help you in the short answer/short essay section. (It's not cheating – it's using all the resources at your disposal).
- d) When in doubt, raise your hand. If I can't answer your question (because it would be unfair to others), I'll tell you.
- e) Do not provide an opinion unless you're asked for one; just stick to the course concepts.
- f) Take your time; you're being tested on your mastery of the course materials, not your ability to finish tests quickly (in this class at least). So go over your answers, make sure all answers have been completely filled in on the Scantron sheet, and make sure you've followed all instructions carefully.
- g) Finally, do not follow Calvin's advice below:

