

LC-DC Podcast Episode 3: Exam Prep with Sam

Transcript

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Ryan

Hello, everyone, and welcome to the LCDC podcast, advice for students, from students, brought to you by the Douglas College Learning Centre. I'm your host, Ryan, and I'm joined by...

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Sam

Sam. I am a submit-a-draft tutor. I studied for about 2 1/2 years here at Douglas, but right now I'm about a year into UBC. I'm taking my semesters kind of slowly, but I am in technically third year standing as a psych major with a minor in education right now.

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Ryan

Cool. How's your semester going so far?

Sam

Good. I think the first year was a little bit difficult because as I started going into my third year courses, I really had to put some of the things I preached to the test.

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Ryan

So you're saying it got real this semester. And you're putting your, what you've been talking about, preaching about, to the test. So that's good because that's what we're going to talk about today. We're going to talk all about exam prep and test prep. And I know it's midterm season as we're recording and this podcast will probably be released in November, so by that time, we'll be looking forward to finals. So lots to talk about, Sam. You ready?

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Sam

Yeah.

Ryan

Awesome. All right, let's get into it. So before we do, I'd just like to acknowledge that Douglas College campuses are located on the unceded traditional and ancestral lands of the Coast Salish peoples, including the territories of the Katzie, Kwantlen, Kwikwetlem, Musqueam, Qayqayt, Squamish, Tsawwassen, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples.

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All right, Sam, let's talk about preparing for tests and exams. So thinking ahead to finals, it may be a month or a few weeks away, but really how far in advance should we start preparing for a test or exam?

Sam

I think we should start, and I know this might be easy to say, but the whole semester I think is preparation for the exam. And I think that can be broken down more smartly than we might tend towards.

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And I'm, of course, guilty of this, but I think what happens is that we put a lot of pressure on ourselves as students to have these really condensed sessions and memorization before exams. So it's like, oh, it's finals week, gotta start cramming. But I think that makes studying a lot more difficult and more ineffective than it has to be. I think that puts not only the pressure on us to learn the material really for the first time in that study session, but also to remember it.

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And I think our brains just don't work that way. And we kind of understand this. We don't, we have some sort of intuitive understanding that we learn best when we repeat something, when we learn it over and over again. So I think there should be some passive studying that goes along throughout the semester that's maybe less intense and something that we don't need to dread.

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And then I think that final exam prep, the kind that you associate the days before the exam, I think that is when you should be reviewing, not learning. And so, you know, I think it's a mix of, of course, I review right before, but also you should be having that exam in mind at really the, by the first time you have content, maybe the first or second week.

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Ryan

You mentioned the term passive studying. I'm curious what you mean by passive studying.

Sam

I mean, there are obviously popular methods of studying. There's like the old highlighting with the textbook. And that gets, I mean, it gets a lot of flack because it is passive. And if you just do that, it's not going to be enough to prepare yourself for the final.

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But I think having that initial kind of light exposure to the material, it makes it more approachable. Because if you go into your first study session with the expectation that I'm going to memorize everything here, this is my one and only read-through, I need to make all my time efficiently used, it puts perhaps a little bit of perfectionistic procrastination on you. And you'll wait for the right time where the right motivation hits you, but it probably won't.

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Ryan

Right. So you're saying we don't have to be perfect when it comes to planning ahead and mapping out our study time. Tell us, Sam, what do you do to when you prepare for a test? Take us through your routine.

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Sam

I think, again, with that kind of passive studying, there is a sense where I try my best to re-expose myself to the material and learn in the way I know that learning works, at least for me, which is repeated exposure. So before a midterm is even around the corner, I'm on the bus or the train and I invested in just this cheap little tablet. And I just review my notes and I take a look.

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And even if I'm not maximizing my brain power in that moment – there is a time where you really got to sit down and hit the books – but until that time, I kind of let it marinate, I suppose. I expose myself to it, even if it's not in the most ideal circumstance. And so if I have, I don't know, if I have to kill 10 minutes in a waiting room, even if it's just on my

phone, it's right there. It's better than waiting around. So I try to passively remind my brain that I am a student and that these are things that I've written down.

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Ryan

As if you needed more reminders that you're a student, right? Yeah, that's a great strategy is keeping on going back to it. You always have, we always have our phones on us. So if we have our material on our phones, ostensibly we can look at it anytime we want. But most often when I look at my phone, I look at something else like Instagram or news or something like that. So how do you, how are, how do you maintain that discipline that enables you to look at study materials rather than social media or something a little bit more entertaining.

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Sam

I think it's accessible to most people what I do, which is it might take some time. I invest in creating, I suppose, some restrictions on those entertainment sources. I use, I'm not going to endorse any apps, but there are apps you can find that are specifically designed for this. And there is a movement of a sort of digital minimalism.

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So I mean, I, on my phone personally, I've deleted most of my social media. And so it's kind of boring enough on there that studying is a viable option. And I guess I dedicated a considerable amount of time trying to remove the fluff on my phone and like being aware that these apps are designed to capture our attention.

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I for a while thought that it was good enough to just exercise willpower, but I mean, we have usually like behavioral analysts creating these apps that are designed to, you know, your attention is a resource for them. And so I have my notifications, pretty much most of my notifications blocked out.

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Anything that I feel is too predatory on my attention, instead of trying to wrestle with it, I just get rid of it. And so I have like a, like on my computer, I have like a different user that I keep all the distracting stuff on so that I know that I'm going to allow myself to have fun, but I'm going to make it so that it's intentional and not let, I don't know, my distractable self get

distracted and not rely too much on willpower and using up my, I don't know, my brain load or my cognitive powers to resist.

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Ryan

Yeah, that's great advice because as you said, willpower, we often think, oh, I can just summon the willpower to not look at these really addictive apps. But really, there's only so much willpower that human beings have, right? Okay, going back to our process of studying for a test, let's say there's a lot of time before a test. So we have a few weeks. You mentioned looking at the material in an ongoing manner.

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So whenever you have a few minutes on the bus or whatever, what else can we do to prepare for a test when we have lots and lots of time? I used to think it was enough to just go to class and do all the readings and homework. Is that the case?

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Sam

When we have a lot of time, I think one way to, a recurring theme for me is to be kind to yourself, use study tips that you would kind of recommend. And you would not, I don't know, if your friend was struggling with studying, you wouldn't say, just lock in and don't procrastinate, right?

Ryan

Buckle down, right?

Sam

Yeah, you wouldn't say that. You'd give more practical advice and be more practical and understanding to yourself.

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And I think like one thing that I do that is a self-kindness is I use time that could potentially be used for studying at the start of the semester, a considerable amount of it, organizing. And so I have everything very accessible for my studying, because one of the reasons I'd procrastinate or take too long in my sessions is because I'd spend the first 15 minutes trying to gather all my materials.

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So at the start of the semester, I don't do it because of some abstract, I don't know, value of organization, but because I know it will help me. And so I send everything. I have a calendar that I build. It takes hours. I put all my due dates on it. I say, by this day, I should have this reading done, so that anytime I see an appropriate moment, I don't have to go through the extra work of figuring out what I have to do.

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It's like, okay, right now I have time to study. Okay, let me look at my calendar. This is here. Okay, let me go to the folder where I already put it in and I just started reading. It's just taking that extra time to make it easier for yourself when you are getting ready to study, I think is pretty important.

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Ryan

Yeah, that's great advice. I like to think that taking a few extra hours at the start of the semester to organize and get yourself set up will save you more time in the long run. So on the topic of organization, Sam, what do you do to organize and plan your study time?

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Sam

I know when I'm most effective with my work. And so for me, if I have a day where I have nothing in the morning, in the morning I'm the most alert. I'm the least tired, like a couple hours after the morning. I try to plan my, I guess, if it's like an intense study session, that's when I try to plan it so that I'm caffeinated, I'm not exhausted.

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I haven't done anything too fun in the day because that's one of the things is that if you do something too fun in the day, you don't want to study after that. And that's just like kind of how our dopamine systems work. And so heavy study sessions are going to be planned when I have the most energy. I might not be motivated. Motivation is this nebulous thing. It's like, oh, I'll do it when I'm motivated. That might never happen. You need to set up the conditions for motivation.

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But if I'm doing something easier, if I'm doing kind of that passive stuff, you know, I might do it on the way back from class, even though I'm tired, even if it's not ideal. It's like, so long

as it's something sometimes. But I guess when I look at my assignments, I try to make a distinction which ones are easy, which ones are hard, which ones take so much time. And I try to work with myself rather than against myself in that way.

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Ryan

That's great advice because we're not superheroes, right? As much as we like to think we're Iron Man or Spider-Man or pick your favorite superhero, we can't, it's really hard to focus after, say, an eight-hour shift or after we've been having fun, we want to keep having fun. So knowing when the best times to study are is a great way to prepare in advance. What do you think is the best place to study? Because I know some people like to go to the library, nice and quiet. Others like to go to a coffee shop.

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Sam

It's gotten complicated. It's when we have our phone with us, nowhere is the best place. And most likely you live in a dorm or a shared space or like with your parents. And I'm not going to ask you to conjure up a new space. And so if you can go somewhere that has, I think, two things, which is a lack of distractions and an acceptable amount of comfort such that your discomfort isn't distracting you. I think that's the most important thing.

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You want to be kind of somewhere so, I've already said this, but somewhere so boring that studying is fun. And if you're hanging out with your friends, it takes 0 effort for you to spark a conversation. And that is way more fun than studying. And so I think studying with people you don't know, studying in a place with not many fun things to do, if anything, I know that it can get a little bit expensive. If I just told you to go to a coffee shop every time, that'd be expensive.

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One little trick you can do is, you need to buy food anyway, so I might go to a coffee shop, buy food, and then bring my own tea bags so that I'm not superfluously using money every time I go study, and so that's a little trick. Libraries are good, just turn your phone off, but you also need what humans need, which is sometimes sunlight. You might need air. And so I know deep in the Douglas Library, I would have trouble studying because I don't know if the CO₂ is just too high, but I just felt like I wasn't comfortable enough. And so I had to find, you have to find the right place.

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Ryan

Yeah, that's great advice. And these are things we often don't think about, right? Air circulation, enough light. Often it's just a matter of what's the best place and we don't think about all these factors that'll influence our ability to study, so great advice. Thanks for sharing. Okay, so moving on, we've kind of got an idea of how we can plan and organize our time and where's a good place to study, which is really just a boring place without distractions. Let's talk about how students can know what to study. Like, how do we identify the most important things?

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Sam

Yeah, this is probably, like, of all these things, it's probably the most cognitively taxing. It's like almost the hardest job as a student is if it's not made explicitly clear by the instructor, like, this is going to be tested. One method that I learned from one of those Cal Newport books and is used by straight A students is to kind of backwards infer questions and to really think about your material more than from a mere, what is it, remembering place.

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There's this quote where it's like, if you study to remember, there's only like a slight, I'm paraphrasing, there's only a slight chance you'll understand if you study to remember, but if you study to understand, then you'll always remember. And what I try to do is, if I don't know my learning objectives simply through my textbooks, I have the material, I have my notes, and I tried to backwards infer a question.

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Something like, what does this answer in regard to this field? What does this solve? How does this relate to other material? And the more foundational, I don't know, I guess that material answers those questions you're making, the more important that material is. We have those introduction classes and those introduction chapters that we just skim because it's like, oh, this is whatever it's context. But I think paying attention to those introduction questions and thinking about what is your field, what is this course, I think is important. It's not just about remembering a list of terms.

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Ryan

Yeah, that makes sense because it's about understanding how everything fits together, right? Whereas if you're just trying to memorize key terms and whatnot and formulas separate from all that, it's not going to stick as much as if you look at it, everything from the big picture. Is that what you're saying?

Sam

Yeah.

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And of course, this is like course dependent. Like I'm talking about this in psychology. It's like a mix of course content and writing. And so it has more of that thematic importance to it. Some classes, like if it's like, I don't know, I took like a genetics class. To me, that felt pretty obvious. In those courses, I found my course content courses, instructors make it very obvious what they want you to remember, because it's in like your practice questions.

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Ryan

Yeah, that's very helpful, right? And if any instructors are listening, that's very helpful when you tell students exactly what's going to be on the test, right? But we know that's not always the best way to teach.

Sam

One thing I actually like to ask my instructors on the first day if they have questions or like a syllabus questioning section is, if you were taking this course, how would you study it? And I think your instructors will appreciate actually being engaged, and I think you should take advantage of them, because otherwise they're just like a material regurgitation machine.

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Ryan

Yeah, that's a great question.

Sam

Take advantage of that.

Ryan

To bring to office hours, right?

Sam

Yeah, or even in class.

Ryan

Yeah, true. Other students would benefit from the answer, too. Okay, so what do you think, what else can you tell us about the best way to study for an exam? Does it depend on the test question, the amount of time we have?

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Sam

Again, exams can be quite different. I can mostly speak from like this mixed place of like between writing and content, but of course it is like discipline dependent, I think. Speaking For psych, there's like a mix of like recognition questions and recall questions, like two types of memory.

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Those recognition questions are easier. Like our understanding of how memory works, like being able to recognize an answer requires you to internalize it a little bit less than recall it off the spot. But it doesn't hurt to just test yourself in a way using whatever materials you can find or whatever practice you can give yourself to be able to recall, even if you don't need it, even if it's only recognition, being able to bring it up without having to like see the word or just again, kind of that understanding will always help you remember and trying to overstudy.

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I think it's better. I think when people cram, like the metaphor I like to think of or I visualize is like, you have like a small bag and like 100 papers, they need to fit in the bag. If you kind of shove them in, like you might have in elementary school, that bag isn't going to close, the papers are going to fall out, you're not going to be able to find them. If you're like, if you take that extra couple minutes – in the time span of studying, it's hours – but if you take that extra time to organize your materials, you can fit 100 more papers. They won't fall out.

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You won't have that moment in the exam where you're like, what was that thing? You're like, if you have exposed yourself to that concept four times, you're not going to be scurrying around into your bag trying to find it.

Ryan

Yeah, for sure. We always come back to that, right? Cramming's no good.

Sam

Yeah.

Ryan

Unless that's all the time you have.

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Sam

It's hard because I've experienced it too where cramming seems to work because we'll be like, we'll cram for an exam and we'll see, oh, I did kind of well on that. But then you forget the material. And if you need that foundational knowledge for the next exam, you don't realize why you're failing the next exam. It's because you never actually learned it the first time. You only passed the exam.

Ryan

So true. Yeah. You mentioned self-testing. Can you explain what you mean by self-testing and why that's important to studying for a test?

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Sam

This kind of comes back to that kind of questioning. I think it's about testing your understanding rather than kind of what might happen if you're not testing yourself, then what might be happening is your eyes are just retracing concepts. And you're like, oh, I get this, but your eyes are just like retracing the form of that word or something like that, and you're not actually remembering it. And I think

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There's a lot of good digital tools now. Like there are various things you can use to create practice questions. You can create digital study cards. There's a lot of decent ways to do it, depending on your course. If you're taking English, those flashcards aren't going to help. But there are, it depends on the discipline, I think, the type of self-testing you learn.

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Ryan

Definitely. Sometimes tests can cause many people, students, I felt it myself, a lot of stress and anxiety, and sometimes that can actually impact how we do on a test, right? If

I'm stressed out, I might forget things or I might seize up and not do as well as I otherwise would have. So do you have any advice for students who are coping with test anxiety?

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Sam

Anxiety is physical, and there are things you can do physically that I obviously recommend. And before my exam starts, I usually show up about 10 minutes early. And those 10 minutes, I don't look at my notes. I see everybody cramming anxiously. Usually what I actually do is I go outside, if going outside is viable, and I just do nothing for those 10 minutes. And I just kind of sit around and maybe notice the environment. I try to breathe.

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I try to not have too much caffeine. I try to have enough sleep. And these questions, I think, or these kinds of solutions, I remember a time when I was suggested stuff like this, and I'd scoff at them because I'd think, well, of course, it's so simple, it's like my problem runs deeper than that. But you can't solve your, I don't know, general anxiety about school in that 10 minutes before class.

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But you can try to calm your body down enough so that you can perform well enough. And yeah, just take care of your body. Be prepared enough to not have to spend those last 10 minutes. Those 10 minutes exist in the week. You don't need to spend them right before the exam. So I think test anxiety is often solved with ideal preparation.

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Ryan

Right. It starts from the beginning, right? The beginning of the semester when you get the, when you're assigned the test. Yeah, absolutely. You mentioned taking 10 minutes before a test to just go outside and sit around and notice things, breathe, not cram, not really do anything related to the test. Is there anything else you'd recommend students do on the day of a test? Something to bring, something to eat? Anything else? What do you do on the day of a test or exam?

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Sam

I arrive early. I try to eat before the exam. Like usually I'll pack a snack in case like things get inconvenient. Most exam rooms I've ever been in allow you to bring water, and I think

that's probably the most important thing you can bring to an exam, like other than your pencil, is like just bring filtered water or something like that. So that one, it's like a self-soothing thing. It can help you regulate. And staying hydrated is like one of the best things you can probably do for your brain health or your cognition. Again, it seems obvious, but

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It may as well be a cheat code if you're not doing it already. It's like there are these little things you can do that have exponential effects. And if we kind of think of ourselves as brains and vats and we don't exist in the body, then we are not doing the best we can.

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Ryan

Yeah, definitely. Brain's part of the body, right? Okay, so we've talked about preparing, organizing, how to study, what to study, what to do on the day of the test. Sam, do you have any other advice for students who are listening?

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Sam

I guess if there was one thing, I think like one of the most, I guess the holistic takeaway is to study and work with yourself and to be empathetic to, I guess, the limits and boundaries or mechanics of

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being a human being and you can't, there's a moral aspect that comes with studying and there's this, there's a lot of weight that comes to it that most other, that you won't find in a lot of other places in life. And if we put a lot of moralization around willpower and discipline and studying and stuff like that, I think it's probably the wrong and not the best empathetic way to go. I think being smart about how you use your energy, about

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how much time you're using, I think just trying to be as mindful and as aware of the body and the mind, I think that's the bigger takeaway rather than kind of punishing yourself with studying. I think studying is a way in which you perform and you're kind of an intellectual athlete and as physical athletes take care of their bodies, if you are a mental athlete, then you should take care of your mind. And I think that's the more holistic way to go about it, rather than surviving day to day and surviving exam to exam.

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Ryan

Definitely. That reminds me of something you said earlier, which is be kind to yourself. And yeah, I think that sums up what you just said nicely. So thanks for sharing that. All right. Well, if I were taking a test,

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I would definitely feel more ready, more prepared. So thanks, Sam, for sharing your advice with us. And thanks, everyone, for listening to today's show. That's it for today. Remember, the Douglas College Learning Center provides free one-on-one peer tutoring to Douglas students. You can book an appointment or find out more information at our website, library.douglascollege.ca/learningcentre

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If you like this episode, please give us a five-star rating, review, or share it with others who could use some test prep advice. Follow us on Instagram @DCLearningCenter. That's it for today. Thanks, everyone. Thanks, Sam. For those about to learn, we salute you.