Pre-Exam Learning Plan

Use this when: you have an upcoming exam and want a clear plan for what to study, how to study it, how to tell whether your studying is working, and what to adjust before exam day.
Time: About 15 to 20 minutes to make your plan, 3 to 5 minutes for the midpoint check, and a few minutes for the final readiness check.
Moves practiced: Understand + Plan + Practice First + Monitor + Adjust + Verify.

How to use this plan

Preparing for an exam is easier to manage when you treat it as a learning process rather than a countdown to exam day. This plan helps you understand what the exam will require, test your starting point, choose strategies that match what you need to improve, build study sessions, monitor and adjust while there is still time, and check your readiness before the exam.

> **To make your study plan:** Sections 1 to 5
> **Partway through your studying, while there is still time to change your approach:** Section 6
> **Near the end of your preparation:** Section 7
> Brief notes are enough. The tag at the top of each page tells you when that page is used.

Need a quicker start? Use Stop Rereading Everything, a free one-page retrieval and spacing plan at LearningOwnership.com/ThinkFirst.

1. Understand the Exam

Exam information	My answer
Exam date:	
Topics or units:	
Question types or format:	
Resources allowed during the exam:	
AI expectations for studying and during the exam:	

What kinds of thinking will the exam require? Check all that apply. ☐ Recall ☐ Explain ☐ Apply ☐ Compare ☐ Solve ☐ Analyze ☐ Argue or justify ☐ Other: _____

The main thing this exam requires me to be able to do is:

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2. Check My Starting Point

Do not plan only from what feels familiar. Test yourself first.

Use a short attempt that matches what the exam will require. For a closed-resource exam, try before looking at your notes or the answer. For an open-resource exam, practice finding and applying information using only the resources you will be allowed to use and, when appropriate, under the time limits you will face.

If you completed a Post-Exam Learning Review after your last exam, bring forward one change you decided to make:

My Starting-Point Check

Use one row for each important topic, concept, skill, or problem type. Try something first, then record what you can actually do and what still needs work.

Topic, concept, or skill	What can I do now, under exam conditions?	What still needs work?

My highest-priority area for study is:

I will know I am improving when I can:

Evidence rule: Recognition is not enough. Ask whether you can retrieve, explain, apply, or solve as the exam requires.

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3. Know Your Study Options

It is easy to fall back on familiar study strategies. Before choosing, make sure you know what different strategies involve and which ones fit what this exam will require.

Strategy	How to use it and when it helps
Retrieval practice or self-testing	Close your notes and test yourself before looking at the answer. Use flashcards, practice questions, write down what you can recall on a blank page, or, if allowed, have AI or a study partner quiz you one question at a time. Check what you missed, correct it, and retrieve it again later. Useful for remembering, finding gaps, and checking what you can recall without help.
Spacing	Spread practice across several days. Return to important material after time has passed and retrieve it again rather than restarting from the beginning. Useful for remembering material over time.
Explain in your own words	Without copying your notes, explain what an idea means, why it matters, or how it works. Then check what is missing or inaccurate. Useful for understanding, explaining, and comparing.
Application practice	Use a concept, method, or rule on a new example, case, scenario, or problem. Check whether you can explain why it applies. Useful for applying, analyzing, and solving.
Mixed practice or interleaving	Mix related topics or problem types so you must decide which idea or strategy fits each question and why. Useful for comparing, choosing, and solving.
Error analysis	When something is wrong, identify why: a knowledge gap, misunderstanding, wrong strategy, misread question, or an error you could have caught by checking. Correct the cause, then try again. Useful for improving weak areas and problem-solving.
Study group or peer teaching	Meet after each person has done some preparation of their own. Quiz one another, take turns explaining ideas, solve new problems or cases, compare reasoning, and check disagreements against course materials. Useful for explaining, applying, problem-solving, finding gaps, and getting feedback.

A useful warning: Rereading and highlighting can help you review, but they do not show whether you can use what you know. Include studying that requires you to retrieve, explain, apply, solve, or choose before looking at the answer.

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3. Know Your Study Options, continued

> **Study group rule:** Use the group to retrieve, explain, solve, question, and check. Rereading notes together is much less useful than showing what you can actually do.

Think First has more examples and guidance in Part 4: Better Studying Usually Means Active Studying, and Match Your Study Method to the Exam Type. If exam nerves are interfering with your preparation, see Managing Exam Nerves in the same part.

4. Choose Strategies That Fit This Exam

Choose one or two strategies that fit what the exam requires and what your starting-point check showed you need to improve. Then say briefly why each one is a good fit.

Strategy I will use	Why it fits what the exam requires
Application practice	*The exam includes unfamiliar scenarios, and my starting-point check showed that I can define the concepts but struggle to apply them.*

Optional: compare your plan with a classmate or study partner. Did they notice a useful strategy or resource you missed? If you plan to study together, use the study group row in Section 3.

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5. Build My Study Plan

Turn “study for the exam” into specific learning sessions.

The table gives you space for six study sessions. Use fewer or more as the exam and your schedule require. Keep the additional details in your own calendar, planner, or task list if needed.

When and where	What I will practice	Strategy	How I will test my learning

Supports or resources I may use: ☐ Instructor or TA ☐ Office hours or review session

☐ Practice questions

☐ Study partner or group, for quizzing, explaining, peer teaching, comparing reasoning, or problem-solving

☐ Tutor or learning support ☐ AI, if allowed and useful

One support I will use, and how it will help me practice, understand, or get feedback:

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6. Midway Check: Monitor and Adjust

Complete this while there is still time to change your studying. Look back at the highest-priority area you named in Section 2 and how you said you would know you are improving.

What evidence shows that my studying is working? What can I now retrieve, explain, apply, or solve under the conditions this exam will require?

What is still weak, confusing, or being avoided?

Based on what I noticed, one change I will make is:

7. Final Readiness Check

- ☐ I have tested myself under conditions that fit the exam.
- ☐ I have practiced the kinds of thinking the exam will require.
- ☐ I have focused on important weak areas. ☐ I adjusted my studying based on evidence.
- ☐ I know my final priority, exam time and place, and what I may bring.
- ☐ If I used AI: I followed course expectations, checked AI output, and used it to support rather than replace my learning.

My final study priority is:

> **Learning Ownership rule:** Do not measure preparation only by hours studied or how familiar the material feels. Ask, “What can I actually do with what I know?”

If getting started or staying motivated is hard, use the Motivation Menu in the Think First Toolkit. If nerves are interfering, see Managing Exam Nerves in Part 4. For exam-day actions, see During the Exam: Use Your Time on Purpose.

Related tool in Think First: Pre-Exam Learning Plan, in Part 4: When You Have an Exam.

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