A FREE TEACHING RESOURCE | FOR THE INSTRUCTOR

The Pre-Exam Learning Conversation

A 15-minute class conversation, plus a 3 to 5 minute follow-up a few days later

Students often plan exam preparation around time. This activity shifts them toward two questions: What will this exam require? What can I already do?

WHY THIS MATTERS

Students can spend a great deal of time studying without knowing whether it matches what the exam will ask them to do. Familiar material can feel learned even when a student cannot yet retrieve, explain, apply, or solve without looking. The Pre-Exam Learning Plan puts it plainly: do not measure preparation only by hours studied or how familiar the material feels. This activity gets students to gather some evidence before they plan.

WHEN TO RUN IT

Ideally 7 to 10 days before the exam, or whenever there is still time for students to act on what they find. Late enough that they have material to retrieve, early enough that what they find can still change how they study.

PREPARATION

Choose one short readiness prompt that represents something the exam will require. Students should be able to attempt it in about 60 to 90 seconds and check it in under a minute. Anything longer will not fit the fifteen minutes. Decide how they will check it: their notes, a worked solution, a model response, or a brief answer you provide. That is the main instructional preparation.

Give students the Pre-Exam Learning Plan. Keep this guide for yourself. Use pages 3 and 4 to run the activity.

Page 4 helps you choose the prompt. Pages 5 to 7 are facilitation support and the reasoning.

Students need no prior knowledge of Learning Ownership. New to it yourself? Read pages 5 to 7 once.

Have the exam details to hand: date, format, topics, allowed resources, and AI expectations.

Section 1 of the plan asks students for all five.

Open-resource exam? This still works. Match the readiness check to the conditions the exam will use.

Time: 15 minutes in class, plus a 3 to 5 minute follow-up a few days later. About 20 minutes in total.

No learning-science expertise required.

WHAT YOU GET OUT OF IT

Students leave with evidence about what they can currently do, a study strategy chosen for a reason, and a concrete first study session. You make the exam demands explicit and create an opportunity to surface misunderstandings about what the exam requires or how to prepare. That is a chance to correct course-level misunderstandings before students spend hours studying in ways that do not match what the exam requires.

ONLY HAVE FIVE MINUTES?

Name one important kind of thinking the exam requires. Give students one short readiness prompt under conditions that fit what the exam will require, and have them check it. Then have them write one thing that still needs work and one strategy they will use to practice it. That keeps the mechanism intact: exam demand, then evidence, then strategy.

The Pre-Exam Learning Conversation

WHAT STUDENTS FINISH, AND WHEN

In class, 15 min	Sections 1, 2, 4 and the first row of 5. Understand, Practice First, Plan
After class, 5 to 10 min	Finish Sections 4 and 5, reviewing Section 3 as needed. Plan
A few days later, 3 to 5 min	Section 6, Midway Check, instructor-led. Monitor and Adjust. See page 5
Near the end of preparation	Section 7, Final Readiness Check, student-owned. Verify. See page 5

The 15-minute conversation

What to say, what students do, and which section of the Pre-Exam Learning Plan they fill in.

MINUTES 1–2 Activate: how do you know you are ready?

Ask students to think silently for about 10 seconds. Do not take responses yet.

"*How do you usually decide that you are ready for an exam?*"

Then say: "For the next fifteen minutes we are going to plan from evidence instead of study time."

MINUTES 2–5 Name what the exam will require

Section 1 Understand the Exam

Give students the exam details, then tell them what the exam will actually ask them to do. Section 1 offers seven kinds of thinking: recall, explain, apply, compare, solve, analyze, argue or justify. Name the one or two that matter most rather than ticking all of them.

> "*This exam will require more than familiarity. You will need to _____ .*"

Students complete Section 1, including the line "The main thing this exam requires me to be able to do is."

MINUTES 5–8 Test before you plan: Practice First

Section 2 Check My Starting Point

This is the heart of the activity. Section 2 carries the rule: do not plan only from what feels familiar, test yourself first. Say:

"*Before you decide how to study, sample what you can already do. Attempt this on your own under the conditions we are using for this readiness check. This is not a test of your overall readiness. It is one piece of evidence about what you can currently do under these conditions.*"

For a closed-resource check, have students close their notes. For an open-resource exam, use the resource conditions you selected in preparation.

Give the prompt you chose. Then, before they begin:

"*You will not hand this in or be graded on it. This is information for you. A blank is useful information.*"

Then have them check the attempt. Checking the attempt matters. Without it, an inaccurate answer can still feel correct. Say:

"*Now check what you wrote against your notes, a worked solution, or the answer I am giving you. Mark what was accurate, what was missing, and what needs work.*"

Students complete one row of Section 2 from what they noticed, and test themselves on other important topics before finalizing their priorities. Section 2 then asks for their highest-priority area and how they will know they are improving. Section 6 returns to both.

MINUTES 8–11 Choose a strategy that fits the evidence

Sections 3 and 4 Know Your Study Options / Choose Strategies That Fit

Point students to the one or two strategies in Section 3 most likely to fit the kind of thinking you named. Ask them to read those descriptions rather than the whole page, then say:

"*Choose a strategy based on two things: what the exam requires, and what your check just showed you. Do not simply choose the method you usually use.*"

Students record one strategy choice and why it fits in Section 4, and finish the rest after class. If time permits, give them 30 to 60 seconds for the optional partner check Section 4 offers.

MINUTES 11–15 Commit to the first study session

Section 5 Build My Study Plan

Do not ask for a full study schedule in class. Ask for the first row only. Section 5 asks for four things:

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

"*Finish the rest of your plan after class. What matters is that it now starts from what the exam requires and what you can actually do.*"

If time allows, invite one or two general questions about the exam demands or about choosing a strategy. Do not ask students to report how they did on the readiness prompt.

FOR THE INSTRUCTOR | REFERENCE

Choosing Prompts and Strategies

Choose the readiness prompt before class. Use the strategy table during the conversation.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD READINESS PROMPT

Aligned with what the exam will actually require. Short enough to attempt in 60 to 90 seconds.

Checkable in under a minute. Representative of the thinking, not an edge case.

Weak: "Define cognitive dissonance." when the exam mainly requires application.

Better: "Apply cognitive dissonance to this new scenario and explain your reasoning."

Do not choose a recall prompt because it is easy to administer if the exam will require application or analysis. The readiness check should test the thinking the exam will test.

MATCH THE PROMPT TO THE KIND OF THINKING

Recall	Write everything you can remember about ___ without looking.
Explain	Explain ___ in your own words, as if teaching someone new to the course.
Apply	Apply ___ to this new example. What does it help you explain, predict, or decide?
Compare	What is the most important difference between ___ and ___, and why?
Solve	Attempt this problem without looking at a worked example.
Analyze	What matters most in this case, data set, or source, and why?
Argue or justify	Make one claim and give the strongest evidence you can recall for it.

Choosing Prompts and Strategies

For an open-resource exam: you can still use a no-notes check to test foundational understanding, or have students attempt the prompt under the same resource conditions the exam will use. Match the check to what students will actually need to do.

POSSIBLE STRATEGY MATCHES (Section 3 of the Plan)

Starting points, not prescriptions. More than one strategy may fit, and students should choose based on both the exam demands and the evidence their self-testing produced.

Recall	Retrieval practice or self-testing, spaced across several sessions
Explain	Explain in your own words, then check what was missing
Apply	Application practice on a new example, case, or problem
Compare	Explain in your own words, or mixed practice and interleaving
Solve	Application practice, then mixed practice and error analysis
Analyze	Application practice on an unfamiliar case or data set
Argue or justify	Explain in your own words, then application practice

Consider saying this aloud: *rereading and highlighting can support review, but students still need to test whether they can perform the kind of thinking the exam will require.*

FOR THE INSTRUCTOR | FACILITATION SUPPORT

Support and Examples

Read once. The follow-up and the final check are where Monitor, Adjust, and Verify happen.

3 TO 5 MINUTE FOLLOW-UP, A FEW DAYS LATER (Section 6: Monitor + Adjust)

Part of the recommended routine. The launch establishes Understand, Practice First, and Plan. Monitor and Adjust occur when students return a few days later and use new evidence to judge whether their studying is working.

If class time is unavailable, ask students to complete Section 6 independently while there is still time to change their preparation.

Ask students to test themselves briefly again on the area they chose. Then ask: "What can you now retrieve, explain, apply, or solve that you could not do before? What is still weak or being avoided?

Based on that evidence, what is one change you will make?"

The launch taught students not to assume but to test. The follow-up teaches the same thing about their studying.

THE FINAL READINESS CHECK IS STUDENT-OWNED (Section 7: Verify)

Near the end of preparation, students ask whether their studying has produced evidence that they can do the thinking the exam will require. This is not a count of hours studied. It is a readiness judgment based on what they can actually retrieve, explain, apply, or solve.

Leaving this one with students is deliberate, as it is in the Assignment Learning Cycle. Verify is the move they will need when nobody is prompting them.

Support and Examples

ONE STUDENT THROUGH THE WHOLE ROUTINE

A worked example. The point is that evidence drives the strategy, not the other way round.

Exam demand	Apply theories to unfamiliar cases
Readiness check	Can define the theory, but struggles to apply it to a new case
Priority	Application, not more rereading
First session	Attempt three new cases without notes, then check the reasoning
Midway evidence	Can now identify the right theory, but explanations are still weak
Adjust	Explain why the theory fits each case before checking the answer
Final readiness	Can now apply the theory correctly to unfamiliar cases without checking first

IF A STUDENT SAYS

"I got most of it wrong."
That is useful information. You found an area to work on while there is still time to improve it.

"I do not know where to start."
Start with one gap your readiness check revealed, something you could not yet retrieve, explain, apply, or solve without looking.

"I will just reread my notes."
How will rereading show you that you can do it without looking? Choose something that tests you.

"I did fine on the last exam without this."
Then you already have a method worth keeping. The check tells you whether it is working for this exam, which may ask for something different.

DO I COLLECT IT? DO I GRADE IT?

Generally, no. The plan holds honest information about gaps, readiness, and weak areas, and keeping it private can make it easier to use as a working document. If participation needs to be recognized, ask for the first study-session commitment rather than the complete plan.

WHAT NOT TO DO

Do not run it the night before. There is no time left to act on what students find.

Keep the readiness check private and ungraded, so students can use it as honest information about their current learning.

Do not turn it into a review session. The value is that students identify the gap, not that you close every gap for them.

Do not ask for the whole study plan in class. Section 5 needs more time than you have.

The Learning Ownership System

New to Learning Ownership? Read this section once.

WHAT THE LEARNING OWNERSHIP SYSTEM IS

Seven moves students can use across many academic tasks. Each is a question rather than a rule, so students enter wherever the situation requires and return as often as it takes. The system is a practical translation of research on self-regulated learning, metacognition, retrieval practice, feedback, and motivation. This routine uses six of the seven.

WHERE EACH MOVE APPEARS IN THIS ROUTINE

Understand	What will the exam cover, what format and resources apply, and what kind of thinking will it require? Section 1
Practice First	What can I retrieve, explain, apply, or solve before looking? Section 2
Plan	Where am I starting? What are my priorities? Which strategies and study sessions fit? Sections 2 to 5
Monitor	What evidence shows my studying is working? Section 6, a few days later
Adjust	What needs to change based on that evidence? Section 6
Verify	What can I actually do now, and what final priority remains? Section 7, student-owned

Transfer is the one move this routine does not practice. The Post-Exam Learning Conversation uses new evidence from the exam to Monitor and Adjust, then carries one lesson forward through Transfer.

THE EXAM LEARNING CYCLE

Before the exam
UNDERSTAND · PLAN · PRACTICE FIRST, then MONITOR · ADJUST · VERIFY

Pre-Exam Learning Plan
What will this exam require?
What can I do now?

After the exam
MONITOR · ADJUST

Post-Exam Learning Review
What patterns does the evidence suggest?

Into the next exam
TRANSFER

One change carried into the first study session of the next Pre-Exam Plan.

THE TWO EXAM CONVERSATIONS ARE ONE CYCLE

The Transfer sentence a student writes after one exam is the input to the first study session of the next. Run the Post-Exam Learning Conversation when graded work returns, then run this routine again before the following exam. Students experience Learning Ownership as a loop rather than as two separate worksheets.

KEEP GOING WITH LEARNING OWNERSHIP

The whole system	The Seven Moves, a one-page reference
After the exam	The Post-Exam Learning Conversation
The complete book	Explore Think First
Everything free	LearningOwnership.com/educators

All free resources