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**Patrick Sherratt**

*Author, speaker and trainer  
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**by Patrick Sherratt**

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## Passing Exams For Dummies®

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# Introduction



**I**n school, I under-achieved and my exam grades showed it. As a teenager I didn't really know what I wanted to do when I left school. I knew what I didn't want to do — go to a university! My parents didn't go; my older brother and sister didn't go, so going to college never really entered my head. With no clear goals, I floated through school doing enough to get through, but never aiming to excel. A decade later, standing in the unemployment line because the company I'd been working for had gone bust, I realized that I needed to go back to school.

As an adult student in college, I wanted to do well academically. I studied psychology and education, and in the process of taking a lot of tests, became interested in finding out how examinations measure learning. As I researched and applied how to improve learning and how to prepare for exams, I started to do very well in school. For the first time in my life, I was getting As and Bs. One year, I won an award for excellence. My confidence soared and my academic self-image improved — I was smarter than I once thought.

Are you taking an exam soon? Let me assure you: After you discover how your brain functions; how your thinking influences your learning; how your memory works; and then synthesize this kind of meta-cognitive knowledge into a practical step-by-step approach to preparing for exams, you can make huge improvements to your exam results. I did, and I'm convinced that doing well isn't necessarily about how naturally smart you are academically, but about how smart you are in your preparation techniques.

So why are you holding this book? Are you a senior wanting to get through high school, or a college or university student going for a degree? Perhaps you're in a life transition and returning to education to gain new skills, or you're about to take a career exam to improve your chances of a promotion? Whatever your reason for picking up this book on passing exams, achieving academic success is possible when you know how.

Be aware. Words don't teach; experience teaches. The information contained in this book is absolutely meaningless

unless you're prepared to incorporate it into your current exam preparation.

So, you have a decision to make. How badly do you want to pass your exams? Are you prepared to do the work and apply the ideas in this book? If not, put this book down right now and walk away. You'll find no value here unless you're willing to explore different parts of this book and use the exercises to improve your exam preparation skills.

## About This Book

I've devoted a lot of time and effort over the years to implementing different learning strategies for students, based on my Masters in Education research and personal trial and error. In this book, my intention is to connect with students like you, and give you the best ways I know to improve your exam preparation and ultimately your performance. You can avoid making the same mistake I made in high school; you can take advantage of my years of research and exam experiences and apply these ideas immediately.

In *Passing Exams For Dummies*, 2nd Edition, you can start reading anywhere you want to. The book's modular format means that instead of reading from cover to cover, you can dip in and get the how-to information you need. This is a great time-saving feature — and believe me, I know all about saving time. When you have a mountain of reading to do for exams, the last thing you want to read is another book!

Consider this book a study guide waiting to offer you some well-researched, good advice on how to better prepare for your next exam. Do this and you'll ultimately save time!

I deliberately tried to make this book easy to read by using simple language. I use the following conventions to help information stand out:

- ✔ When I introduce a new concept, I *italicize* the term, then provide a definition.
- ✔ I show website addresses in a different font so they're easy to identify — just type the address as it appears in the book and you'll go straight to the site. And, if the URL breaks to the next line, I don't add a hyphen, so type in exactly what you see.



If you're interested in saving time (like me), you can bypass some information in this book, which I put in simply to please the publisher, otherwise the book looks too thin (just kidding!). For example, occasionally I explain a technical term, especially when covering how your brain works. These paragraphs are accompanied by a Technical Stuff icon, and you can skip them if you want. Similarly, the Patrick Says icon highlights paragraphs that offer personal experiences you may find interesting, but they're not vital reading.

I've also thrown in some fun exercises in the sidebars — those shaded boxes you see in many chapters. You can skip these too; however, I'm hoping you find them intriguing.

## ***Foolish Assumptions***

Exams are not something people do for fun, but they're necessary as long as education systems use the current assessment paradigm. (Although many people believe exams should be done away with, I would be out of a job if that were the case.) So, I assume you have a genuine purpose for reading this book, which may be any one of the following — or a combination of several:

- ✔ You'll be undertaking exams in the near future and you're looking for some basic guidelines and quick tips to help you improve your chances of passing them or doing better than before.
- ✔ You're interested in the how-to of good exam preparation but want the minimum amount of theory.
- ✔ You want to feel confident that you're making the best use of your study time because your time is precious.
- ✔ You may have not done so well on exams in the past and want to improve your overall performance.
- ✔ A long time has passed since you last studied and you want to ensure your success.
- ✔ Passing these exams is really important to you and you're serious about applying these ideas to maximize your results.

## Icons Used in This Book

Use the icons in the margins of this book to pinpoint the information you desire. The meaning for each icon is explained here:



Where to find interesting information on a website that puts you in touch with further resources on preparing for exams.



Although not vital reading, this icon highlights interesting stories from my own and other people's experiences.



This icon indicates important stuff to store away in your memory. You could circle these icons as you read chapters in this book.



This icon marks extra technical information that you don't need as such, but provides interesting details. Read and enjoy, or give the information a miss if you like.



This handy little icon flags special things that can help you to improve your exam preparation. They're little gems of information that can help you make the most of the time you spend studying.



Stop! Watch out! This icon flags common mistakes students make — or what you need to be wary of when you're preparing for and taking exams.

## Beyond the Book

In addition to the material in the print or ebook you're reading right now, *Passing Exams For Dummies*, 2nd Edition, also comes with some access-anywhere goodies on the Web. Check out the free Cheat Sheet at [www.dummies.com/cheatsheet/passingexams](http://www.dummies.com/cheatsheet/passingexams) for some quick action steps you can use to turn your preparation into improved results. The online Cheat Sheet will help you feel confident in knowing that the time you do

spend preparing for your exams is used in the best possible way. For the latest updates on other companion material for this book, visit [www.dummies.com/go/passingexamsfd](http://www.dummies.com/go/passingexamsfd).

## *Where to Go from Here*

I have absolutely no doubt the information in this book can help you improve your exam performance! If you're facing your first exam, check out the chapters in Part I for ways to develop your exam performance mindset. If you have trouble remembering pertinent information, go to Part IV for some tips. Or, if you want to cover all the bases, read this book in sequence, especially the practical steps included in Parts II to V.

After your exams are over, that's it. You can place this book on the shelf to gather dust until your next exams. It's simply a tool to help you improve a certain aspect of your academic life. In the meantime, use the tool wisely. Write in it, scribble in it, tag or dog-ear pages for future reference — do whatever you can to get the best use out of this book.

Finally, I wish you well through your examination process and sincerely hope you can apply these powerful ideas to help you prepare and pass your exams with ease. Go well.



# Part I

# Releasing Your Potential to Pass Exams

getting started  
with

**passing  
your  
exams**



Visit [www.dummies.com](http://www.dummies.com) for great (and free!) Dummies content online.

## *In this part . . .*

- ✓ Find out how your brain works and explore the mechanics of what happens in your brain when you are learning and studying for exams.
- ✓ Discover key principles to get your brain switched on and working to improve how you review, retain, and recall information.
- ✓ Explore your ideal learning states and styles to help make learning and study easier.
- ✓ Get essential tips on how to keep motivated, manage your study time, and concentrate effectively.
- ✓ Understand how your mind works and how to harness the power of an *exam performance mindset* to improve your preparation and ultimately your results.

## Chapter 1

---

# Passing Exams: Preparation Is Everything!

.....

### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Adjusting your exam performance mindset
  - ▶ Exploring the features and functions of your brain
  - ▶ Discovering how to learn more effectively and efficiently
  - ▶ Using thinking strategies to improve your exam preparation and performance
  - ▶ Taking a look at the four steps to effective preparation
- .....

**H**ave you ever thought of taking a test as giving a performance? If you're into music, sports, or drama then you already know the benefits of thinking this way: Preparing beforehand improves your abilities, so that when you get to the podium, the field, or the stage, you can give your best performance.

You can approach exams the same way. During an exam you sit at a desk for several hours, concentrating and writing as fast as you can. Your preparation beforehand determines how well you perform in the exam.

In this chapter, I help you gain an understanding of where you are right now with regard to your exam performance mindset. This understanding can help you develop strategies to enhance your thinking and use techniques that enable you to perform at your peak on exam day.

## *Developing Your Exam Performance Mindset*

No matter what subjects you're studying, whether you're in high school, in college, at university, or facing vocational or entrance exams, to pass your exams you need to do these things:



- ✓ Attend classes, pay attention, and make notes for later review.

Teachers only present information — they don't put it in your head. That's your task and, usually, you're required to follow up with research or further reading.

- ✓ Organize your class notes and plan your study time.
- ✓ Become well acquainted with the subject matter. This involves improving your ability to study and to retain information — two different skill-sets. Right now, you may simply call it study, but to answer exam questions you need to know how to retain information and access it when you need it.
- ✓ Demonstrate your knowledge by performing well on the exam. If you don't perform well on the exam, your results won't reflect how well you know the subject.

Obviously, accomplishing all this takes work, and developing an exam performance mindset gives you a good start and helps you

- ✓ Maintain an attitude of excellence.
- ✓ Know very clearly what you want and why you want to pass your exams (which is your goal, after all).
- ✓ Identify and address how and why you may be holding yourself back.

With the right mindset, you can discover your capabilities, clarify your motives, and gain a better understanding of yourself. Learning and studying then become much easier — and fun!

### *Cultivating the right attitude*

The famous Greek philosopher Aristotle said, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit." What he meant is that the quality and quantity of your thinking



determine how your life goes. If your predominant thoughts are affirming, positive, constructive, and generally optimistic, the quality of your decisions, actions, and ultimately what happens to you will be great as well.

Think about whether your thoughts drive you forward towards being the best you can or make you feel defeated before you've even started.



All meaningful and lasting change begins on the inside, then slowly becomes a reality. Change involves addressing your thinking processes. Becoming aware of what you're telling yourself on the inside helps bring constructive, affirming, positive thoughts to the forefront of your mind. Through repetition, you can make them a habit. You can train your subconscious mind so that you naturally perform at your best no matter what you're doing.

## *Setting your purpose*

Sailing through life without purpose is like sailing the oceans without a destination. A rogue sailor's life may interest some people, but a successful career requires direction. To do well in exams you need to know very clearly *why* you want to achieve good results (or, what you want to do next).



I didn't do very well in my high school exams, mainly because I had no clear-set academic goals and therefore no real reason why I should pass. I didn't know what I was going to do when I left school, so it didn't matter to me how well I did.

The trick is deciding what you want, and then deciding why you want it. Take a moment to visualize achieving your exam goals, then explore all the benefits that follow. Clarifying your purpose in this way helps maintain your motivation when the going gets tough — and when exam time rolls round and you have more than one test to prepare for, the going will get tough!

## *Clearing roadblocks*

Sometimes you may consciously choose a goal (for example, to pass an exam so that you're qualified to do a job you've been offered), but for some reason, you unconsciously sabotage a good outcome. Perhaps you're beset by self-defeating, critical thoughts that point out why you won't do as well in the exam as

you hope. Or you may procrastinate, putting your preparation off until the last minute, then discover you need more time. The small amount of reviewing you do is inefficient and leads to a poor result.



The way around problems like self-defeating thoughts is to identify and analyze all the reasons you may be trying to hinder your own progress. Listing what you perceive to be lacking in your knowledge or skills helps you pinpoint your negative attitudes and beliefs. This requires digging deep and being honest with yourself.

When you become aware of the ways you limit yourself, you can take steps to rectify your behavior so that you're not working against your goals — when it comes to exams or anything else. You can then identify and analyze your good qualities and strengths, and discover reasons why you *can* have what you want. Focusing on good qualities and strengths also improves your motivation because you have a higher expectation of success.

## Exploring your layers — just like Shrek

If you saw the first *Shrek* movie, you may remember the scene where he was talking to Donkey about the onion analogy. What the onion analogy says is that everyone has many layers, which define who they are. However, people usually see only the outer layers (your facade), which may not be who you think and feel you really are, or who you could be. You can peel back the outer layers if you want and discover where your true potential lies.

To develop an exam performance mindset, you have to peel back those layers and identify the ones that are holding you back, and then bring to the fore the layers that can drive you

forward. Sometimes, however, the people closest to you may not like to see changes in you and can hold you back. They've known your outer layers for so long that when you try to show an inner layer — a new way of being — they become disturbed because they're unfamiliar with your new behavior.

It takes courage and support to show your deeper layers. By surrounding yourself with higher performing friends — people who can support your expression of new layers — you'll find that their expectations of you can help you realize your full potential.