

How to Cram

Jill Young Miller

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*Cramming, deeply embedded as a way of student life, often turns up in nightmares as panic over having to take an exam for a course you never signed up for. Real or imagined, the situations that drive us to cram are known too well to us all. Appropriately **enough**, the essay was published in Campus Voice (1987), a magazine distributed free on many college campuses.*

- 1 Frances Avila learned the hard way not to expect miracles overnight. A chronic crammer, the New York University senior did the usual for her midterm in "Major British Writers" last fall: she pulled an all-nighter. Fighting off fatigue and anxiety, Avila forced herself to concentrate on the novels and her notes through dawn, breaking only to splash cold water on her face. Near noon, she closed her books to head for the test.
- 2 The first question—"Expand on the gap between her front teeth"—was a lulu. Avila didn't recognize the allusion to Chaucer's Wife of Bath, even though she'd read the section only hours before. "Not only did I blank out, but I was also frightened," she recalls. "I didn't expect the test to be that elaborate." The bad situation only got worse. She fumbled through 14 more stray lines before plunging into part two, which wasn't any easier. Avila had studied innumerable facts for hours, but she knew only one thing for sure: she was in trouble.
- 3 "I failed the exam," she explains, "because I had to compare and contrast two poets from different time periods. In order to do that, I had to elaborate on all the details within the poetry. But I'd absorbed just enough information the night before to understand what I was reading and not enough to catch all the details."
- 4 Sound familiar? Almost all of us have stood (and sleepwalked) in Avila's shoes at one time or another. Sometimes push comes to shove, crunch comes to cram, and before you know it, you have to read 450 pages in six hours. Pour on the caffeine, you mumble.
- 5 About 90 percent of all students cram, estimates Don Dansereau, a psychology professor at Texas Christian University, who defines cramming as "intense studying the night before or the day of a test."

Quips Ric Schank, a University of Florida senior, "Down here, it's the rule rather than the exception."

Despite its popularity, cramming gets low marks from educators and memory experts, who claim that the last-minute nature of the act kills your chances for payoff at test time.

A quick stroll down memory lane explains why. Most experts identify three types of memory: immediate, short-term, and long-term. You use your immediate memory as you read this, remembering each word just long enough to make the transition to the next.

Short-term memory is limited, too. For example, you use it when you look up a phone number, close the book, and dial. Short-term memory can supposedly hold a maximum of seven items for only a few seconds.

Long-term memory is the big daddy, the one that holds everything you know about the world. It's the memory that last-minute learners need to respect.

How well you organize information on its way into your long-term memory determines how quickly you can retrieve it later, or whether you retrieve it at all. Think of a backpack you'd take on a hike, says Laird Cermak, a research psychologist at the Boston Veterans Administration Hospital and the author of *Improving Your Memory* (McGraw-Hill, 1975). "If your backpack is organized and you get bit by a snake, you can go right for the snakebite kit," he explains.

The magic lies in spacing your study over days, weeks, or even months. That gives you time to mull over the new stuff, relate it to what you already know, and organize it for exam-time recall. "The reason you forget the information is not because it was learned the night before," Cermak explains. "It's because when you crammed you didn't give yourself good ways to remember it in the future." In other words, last-minute studying limits the number of mental retrieval routes you can create.

But it doesn't take a psychologist to explain why cramming often fails. "You throw things into your mind, knowing that you're going to spit them out in a couple of hours and forget them. It's not a good way to learn at all," says NYU journalism senior David Reilly.

No quick-and-dirty detours to long-term retention and instant recall exists. But if you're forced into a late-night, last-minute study session, the results don't have to be disastrous. Here's some advice

to help make the morning after less anxious than the night before:

14 **Find out what kind of test you're in for.** If you cram, you're likely to fare better on multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank tests because they jog your memory with cues, Cermak says.

15 **Find a quiet place to study.** When Avila crams, she seeks out a small room at the library that's devoid of distractions. "I'm cornered," she says. "I have no choice but to look at the print."

16 If you like to study with music in the background, go for something without lyrics and keep the volume down low. Classical music such as Bach can have a soothing effect if your nerves are impeding your studies, says Danielle Lapp, a memory researcher at Stanford University and the author of *Don't Forget! Easy Exercises for a Better Memory at Any Age* (McGraw-Hill, 1987).

17 **Compose a scene that you can re-create during the exam.** If you can, study at the desk or in the room where you'll take the test, or do something while you study that you can do again when you take the test. For example, Dansereau suggests that you chew grape gum. "The flavor acts as a cuing device," he explains.

18 **Build your concentration.** Spend ten minutes warming up with a novel or magazine before you tackle a tough chapter. Says Cermak, "It helps you block out whatever else is going on."

19 **Watch what you eat and drink.** Avoid heavy meals and alcohol. Both could make you drowsy, cautions Lapp. If you need a cup of coffee to perk up, fine. But putting too much caffeine in your system can make you jittery and break your concentration.

20 **Mark your book.** Even if you only have time to read the chapter once, it helps to highlight important terms and sections. Identifying the key words and passages requires you to be mentally alert and forces you to be an active rather than a passive reader.

21 **Spend time repeating or discussing facts out loud.** Recitation promotes faster learning because it's more active than reading or listening. (Try it out when you study for your next foreign language vocabulary quiz.) Discussion groups are helpful for this reason.

22 **Take short breaks at least every few hours.** They'll help you beat fatigue, which takes a heavy toll on learning. Two hour-long sittings separated by a 15-minute break are more productive than one two-hour session in which your mind wanders throughout the second half. It doesn't matter what you do during those breaks; just take them.

Experiment with memory techniques. They impose structure on new information, making it easier to remember at test time. The "house" method is one of the oldest. Let's say you want to remember a list of sequential events for a history exam. Try to imagine the events taking place in separate but connected rooms of your house. When the test asks you to recall the events, take a mental amble through the rooms. 23

Another simple technique involves acronyms. You may have learned the names of the Great Lakes (Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, and Superior) with this one: HOMES. 24

Try some proven learning strategies. Richard Yates, a counselor and time management expert at Cleveland State University, recommends the SQ3R method: survey, question, read, recite, review. Survey the material to formulate a general impression; rephrase titles and headings into questions; read through the material quickly to find the main points and the answers to your questions; recite those main ideas, taking brief notes; and review. Even when you're pressed for time, the strategy can help. "It may take a little longer," says Yates, "but it's worth the effort." 25

Get some sleep. UF's Schank quit all-nighters after his freshman year. "I'd go into a final and be so wired from staying up all night that I'd lose my concentration," he says. "I'd miss questions that I knew I wouldn't miss if I were in a good frame of mind." Now he crams until about 3 A.M., sleeps for about four hours, and hits the books again at 8 A.M. 26

Psychologists and memory researchers can't specify how much sleep you need—everyone has his or her own threshold—but they do stress its importance. Says Lapp, "You're better off getting some sleep so that your mind is rested for the exam than you are cramming the whole night." Just don't forget to set that alarm clock before you go to bed. 27

For an early-morning exam, it's best to do heavy-duty studying right before you go to sleep. In other words, unless you've got back-to-back exams, don't cram and then do something else for a few hours before a test. Freshly learned material is remembered much better after a period of sleep than after an equal period of daytime activity. 28

Relax. It may sound simplistic, but it's key to good test performance. "Anxiety is enemy number one of memory," Lapp explains. She compares a student taking a test to a singer performing onstage. 29

"There's no way a completely anxious singer can utter a sound," she says.

30 Cramming is like going to the dentist; if you have to do it, you want it to be as painless and as productive as it can be. After all, no one goes to college to take a semester-long class and promptly forget all the new information that's been taught. At least Frances Avila didn't. After her disastrous midterm, she didn't dare risk cramming for her "Major British Writers" final exam. This time, she spaced her studying over a period of weeks, earned an A, and salvaged her grade for the semester.

31 That doesn't mean she's quit cramming for good—in fact, she hasn't even tried to. Instead she's perfected her technique. Ditto for Reilly, who's tried unsuccessfully to break the habit. "Every semester I kick myself a million times and scream that I'm not going to cram next semester," he laments. "But it never seems to work."

Thesis and Organization

1. The steps to follow are given in paragraphs 14–29, which leaves almost half the essay taken up by introduction and conclusion. Examine paragraphs 1–13 and identify the use of narration, example, and definition.
2. Analyze the role of narrative in the introduction and conclusion. What effect does Miller achieve with the story of Avila?
3. How necessary is Miller's definition of cramming? Of types of memory? Explain the relation between the two.
4. What principle do you find behind the sequencing of paragraphs 14–29? How does that principle relate to Miller's informative purpose?
5. Consider what Miller tells you about studying, memory, cramming, and Avila. In your own words, state her thesis.

Technique and Style

1. Miller's paragraphs are shorter than you would usually find in an essay of this length. How can you justify the relative shortness of her paragraphs?
2. What point of view does Miller use in the essay? What reasons can you find for that choice?
3. The imperative can be rude and bossy, as in the command "Shut the door." How would you characterize Miller's use of the imperative? How does she avoid using it rudely?
4. What sources does Miller use in her essay? What purpose do they serve?