

## Study Smarter, Not Harder

By Katherine Robinson

**There are few things more intimidating than some reading assignments for clinical nursing courses.** You are

preparing for your class on Friday, and have been assigned to read two chapters. No big deal, right? But what if the two chapters total 180 pages? What then? For some, the option is not to read.

Others start gathering multiple highlighters, sticky tabs and index cards, planning to read and memorize all the assigned content. Neither of these approaches work. Skipping the readings leaves you ill prepared for class, limiting your ability to participate, while memorizing the text does not prepare you for the infamous critical thinking, analysis and synthesis. *There must be a better way.*

**The following “Studying Backwards” strategy is one I have taught to both graduate and undergraduate students.**

This ten-step strategy is particularly useful in content-intensive courses such as medical-surgical nursing, critical-care nursing and applied pathophysiology. The techniques can be used for both class and exam preparation. Students report less study-induced stress when they study backwards.

**Step One (Preparation):  
What am I supposed to learn?**

Each unit in your course should have a set of objectives describing the specific content for which you will be responsible. These objectives will set the parameters for your study. In a well-run program with a coherent curriculum, your tests, quizzes and other assessments of student learning will all flow from these objectives.

**Step Two (Preparation):  
What have I already learned that is relevant to this content?**

Every nursing student has taken a variety of prerequisite courses. To master new content, you must retain previously learned content. In our program, we identify key pre-requisite concepts for each unit. If your faculty does not identify the necessary prerequisite knowledge, you should do it yourself as a part of your study preparation. Just ask yourself, “What did I learn in physiology or microbiology or...that might be relevant to this content?” If you are stuck, skim the first portion of the assigned chapter, because prerequisite knowledge is likely to be included there. See box on the right for examples. If there is a glossary or list of terms in the chapter, it may include hints about required pre-requisite knowledge.

Once you have identified the relevant prerequisite knowledge, review as necessary. This step will make it easier to understand the applied content that will be covered in your course.

**Step Three (Action): Read the chapter summary if available**

Many clinical nursing texts include a chapter summary. If so, read the summary, paying particular attention to items directly related to your unit objectives.

This is an appropriate place to use your highlighter. Give yourself permission to skim over points that are not directly related to your objectives.

**Step Four (Action):  
Look at the pictures**

Textbooks are full of illustrations, tables and flowcharts. Look at these items, once again, giving yourself permission to skip those not directly related to your objectives. If the illustration is relevant, study it carefully. Can you step through it? Does it make sense to you? Do you see progressions and connections of concepts or ideas?

**Step Five (Action):  
Use ancillary materials**

Today’s nursing students have an abundance of ancillary materials available to them. Most textbooks have associated web sites and come with CDs. Additionally, topical review materials are available from many publishers.

**Step Six (Action):  
Review content questions**

Take advantage of prepared review questions. These may be found on ancillary web sites, in your text, or in NCLEX review books. Thoughtfully answer the questions relevant to your objectives. As you score your review questions, read the answer and rationale. Pay attention not only to the questions

you answered incorrectly, but also to the questions you answered correctly, perhaps for the wrong reason. This will help identify your areas of weakness.

**Step Seven (Action):  
Refer to your text**

Now is the time to read your text. Focus on those areas you have identified as troublesome. Give yourself permission to skim over content which is not related to your objectives, or which you understand well. Use your highlighter and sticky notes sparingly (these tools should help you zoom in on very specific points that you need to remember, or points that are confusing to you).

**Step Eight (Summary):  
Prepare a list of items that require clarification**

By this point in your studying process, you should have a good idea of what you know and understand already, and what is still unclear. Make a list of these items. During the classroom presentation, you can use the list as you listen to the presentation, asking appropriate questions for clarification. If you are still unclear about these items after the classroom session, it is time to visit your faculty member during office hours.

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Class Content	Prerequisite Knowledge	Course Where Concept Was Taught
<b>Hypertension and heart failure</b>	Renin-angiotension-aldosterone system	Physiology
	Cardiac muscle function	Physiology
	DASH diet or nutritional approaches to hypertension	Nutrition
<b>Respiratory disease</b>	Anatomy of the respiratory system	Anatomy
	Mechanics of breathing	Physiology
	The process of gas exchange	Physiology

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### Step Nine (Test Preparation): Take a cue from your faculty

Students expend considerable energy trying to discern what type of question a faculty member may ask. In reality, exam questions may be an amalgam of many faculty members' efforts, or they may include publishers' test bank items, tried and true questions from previous exams, as well as newly generated questions. How questions are selected or prepared for an exam, however, is governed not only by the course objectives, but also by what the individual faculty members believes is important. In one of my classes, I present a key conceptual point in in 96-point font on the PowerPoint slide, and I verbally remind the students of its importance. I tell them it will probably be on the exam. When I include this key point in a fill-in-the blank question, 25% of the students still get it wrong. I am bewildered each time this happens. Listen to what your faculty tell you and be sure you understand those points because they are very likely to be included in the exam questions.



### Step Ten (Test Preparation): Target your review.

If you have prepared yourself well for class and listened carefully during class presentations, you will have very little studying to do for your exam. All of your efforts will now pay off. Cramming for an exam is never productive, but targeted studying can be. You probably don't need to study the material you really enjoy or understand. Studying this material is tempting because it makes you feel competent and smart. What you *do* need to study is material that is confusing to you, or material you really don't like (maybe you don't like it because you don't understand it). Confine your preparation to that which you do not know, or that which you do not like. If you have another set of sample test questions available from review books or ancillary software, take it now to confirm your knowledge. Otherwise, get a good night's sleep, eat a good breakfast, and go forward and conquer the exam! Studying backwards will get you to your goal — you will be ready. ∞



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