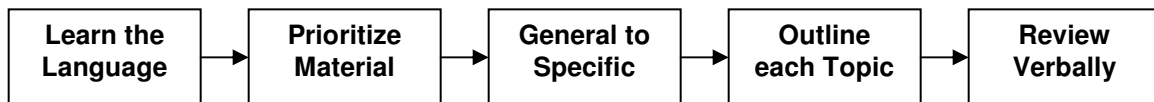


# Dunning It – How to Ace Professor Dunn’s Exam

## Introduction

The following is a description of a system-based method for preparing for college level exams of all types including those that contain multiple choice, short answer and essay type questions. The system does take time to develop and apply but is highly effective. If you choose to employ the system it *will* produce results for you.

The basic system consists of the five steps found in the flow chart below.



The system is meant to work together. Merely picking one step out may yield limited results but you won’t experience the full effect unless you apply all of the steps in order. The reason is that the system is designed as a repetitive process that goes into increasing levels of detail at each stage. As in most things, academic learning is largely an endeavor that benefits from repetition which is why you practiced your multiplication tables until you memorized them.

Some professors are fond of saying that if you “understand” you don’t need to memorize. That is unadulterated bull. If you don’t memorize the material you won’t be able to regurgitate it when they ask for it on a test. Understanding is not enough, you must also be able to feed it back to them which means you must add remembering what you understand to the mix. That is, in a word, memorization.

The underlying philosophy of the system is that if you follow the process step-by-step you are guaranteed to at a minimum pass the class and probably earn a very high grade. This philosophy is based on doing all the work. Go to every class, do every assignment, do all the readings and follow each step. If you follow each step you will look up at the end and see the result. Work the system and the system will work, if you don’t the system will work you.

## Learning the Language

To succeed in a class the first hurdle is to be able to speak the professors’ language. No not English or French or whatever else they may speak but the language of their professional discipline. Almost every discipline, from Accounting to Zoology, has a special language. Many of the business disciplines share terms as do mathematics and the sciences. If you want to be able to speak intelligently on any subject you need to be able to speak its language. An additional advantage is that you will get the benefit of the doubt from your professors when they are grading your work even if you may not be one-hundred percent correct conceptually.

If the first matter of importance is to recognize that language is important then the second is to start paying attention to it. This is the part that makes this step the longest of them all. Learning the language is an iterative process that begins the first day of class and doesn't end until you walk into the final exam. The fastest way to learn language is through immersion in it. If you go to every class, do all the readings, and pay attention to the language while you're doing it you will pick it up without noticing you will just find yourself using it. The key is to consciously pay attention to the language and seek out chances to try it out whether through discussions, note taking or in the readings.

The language of ethics is no different. Learn the correct language to use when discussing the various ethical frameworks and you have mastered half of the class right there. Listen carefully and write down how the professor phrases specific concepts and note the differences when he points them out. If you learn the language of ethics and phrase your answers that way you will be pleasantly surprised how well you do especially on the essay portion of the exam.

### **Prioritize Material**

The second step is one that I have often heard and I suspect you have as well. The idea is not new to the process of preparing for an exam but it is still important. The important piece of this stage is not the concept, which is simple, but the accomplishment which is less so.

The first key to prioritizing is that you can't do it the night before the test. You begin prioritizing based on the importance the professor places on material during class. They all give hints during lecture telling you which concepts are more or even most important. Most will tell you which sections of the lectures or readings are most important. In addition many professors do an exam review in which much of the material is covered. In Professor Dunn's case he points out what material he considers to be most important for each exam...numerous times. If you are present and paying attention put a big star next to the concept or write the name of the case down if he mentions one as being especially important.

The second way to prioritize the material after importance of material is by your familiarity with it. If you know a topic fairly well leave it till the end and focus on areas where you are really weak. Some knowledge is better than none so the first order of business is to gain a general proficiency in as many topics as you can. Pick the most important topic about which you don't feel comfortable writing an essay on and prioritize that topic first.

Many professors provide a topic based study guide and Professor Dunn is no exception. This list of topics should be prioritized as best you can from the most important topic to the least important topic first. Then you want to pick the most important topics about which you know the least and begin with them.

So let's review. You have learned the language and prioritized your topics. You are ready to actually start reviewing for the exam and although you have only just begun you have already won half the battle.

### **General to Specific**

This is the stage of the process where you actually begin to study for the exam. The principle involved here is fairly straightforward. Begin by taking each topic in order of prioritization and looking at each with a very general view of the material seeking to identify the big ideas and concepts.

This tactic comes is very useful in the multiple choice section of the exam because many questions only require a general knowledge of the topic rather than an in-depth understanding. There have been many instances in which while I did not have a thorough understanding of a topic I had enough of a general view of the big ideas that I was able to pick the right answer out of the crowd even though I could not have written an essay on the subject. I know of one case where a student did not read the material but merely scanned the subheadings and that was enough to get the multiple choice question correct.

Subheadings in the readings are especially helpful in this regard. Many of the readings are organized by concept making them easy to pick out. Begin by making a general outline of the big concepts in each topic on a piece of notebook paper. Don't worry about breaking each one down just yet that will come later.

The goal here is to organize the big ideas in a loose outline that makes sense to you. Once you have gone through each topic looking at it from a general viewpoint you can get down to specifics by gradually adding more details as you uncover them. This step will give you the general framework for the next step, outlining each topic.

### **Outlining Each Topic**

This is the step where you get down to the nitty-gritty. You have a general outline of each topic from the preceding step, now you are ready to flesh out that framework with detail.

Begin by writing out the first big idea from your general outline directly underneath the general outline. Next define any language which needs definition and proceed to the arguments. Most of the ethical readings are putting forward an argument of one type or another. These should be identified and written down. Next the pro's and con's of each argument should be identified and added to the outline. It is also helpful to identify all of the ethical theories that apply to each argument as that is a popular tie-in type question. Where necessary you will want to compare and contrast the ethical theories.

The goal here is to outline the concept as if you would be writing an essay on it, as you will be. Along the way you will gain an understanding of the material in sufficient depth that the multiple choice questions will be extremely easy to answer.

Do this for every big idea in the topic seeking to link ideas and concepts from the ethical framework because that is what the exam is most designed to do. Students who do well on the exams are the ones who are able to link ideas from the lecture to the readings and back again. The outlining step is designed to provide the level of knowledge to do this.

A typical outline of a topic will run from one to three pages in length and be more detailed than any test question could possibly be. What you are shooting for here is overkill. With this method you can learn the material so deeply that the essays and especially the multiple choice questions will be simple by comparison.

### **Review Verbally**

This is the section that gets the most raised eyebrows when it is explained. Yes it is a little different but believe me *it works*. You have painstakingly crafted outlines for every topic and learned a lot in the process no doubt. In this stage you are going to drive it home with such force that by the time you have gone through it once you will be able to teach it.

In a very real sense that is what you are doing in this stage of the process, teaching it to yourself. Find someplace quiet and away from interruptions and distractions. This is not something you want to do in front of other people, you will be too self-conscious. Get all your notes, the outlines you made and the readings together and in front of you, a good place is to put them all on a bed or table in front of you.

Taking the highest priority topic first you begin reviewing the outlined topic by going point-by-point through the topic as if you were teaching it to a class yourself. Pose the question, give the background of the readings and make the arguments and counter arguments the same way a professor would. Refer to the outline as needed to clarify a point or get your wording correct. If you are uncomfortable with how you phrased something keep saying it until you get it right.

Why does this work? It invokes the rule of repetition we talked about in the introduction. First you have to think about what you want to say. Second you have to say it, making the words fit your meaning. Third you hear it aloud and as it reverberates back to you. Thus covering one topic verbally you get the benefit of three repetitions. If you do it again you are up to six repetitions and so on. Repetition breeds familiarity. By “teaching” it to yourself you get massive amounts of repetition in short period of time.

Working down your list, teach each topic to yourself “out loud”. The goal here is to achieve top-of-mind recall for each topic so that you can write intelligently about it when you get to the exam. You should try to do one comprehensive verbal review prior to each exam.

### **Time**

This process is detailed and laborious to be sure. As you get better at it you can begin to revise the process based on time etc. It is possible to teach yourself verbally from

your notes and the readings without going through the outline stage but generally only if it is a multiple choice exam. Essay exams almost universally require an outline approach to coverage of the material unless you are a subject-matter-expert.

Give yourself plenty of time to go through the process, several days of full-time work at the least. While it is not easy it is the closest thing to a sure thing in academia. Don't worry if you don't make it through the entire study guide in equal depth. If you have prioritized correctly you may not even cover the least important parts at all but that won't hurt you substantially because there won't be many questions on the exam from those parts.

### **Taking the Exam**

Taking an exam is an art in and of itself. The first thing to do is relax. No matter what happens during the exam or how it turns out panicking is not going to help. If you have followed the above process you will be well prepared so trust that the right answer will come to you when you need it.

Tactics can help, here are a few. Everyone likes to do it differently but the best method I have found is the following. When you get the exam take some time to look it over before you begin. Take a look at the essay questions and let your mind start working on them. If you have an idea for one of them jot down a quick outline or a thought then just let your mind go to work on it while you turn to the multiple choice. Move methodically through the multiple choice questions and don't overanalyze your answers. If you don't know the answer just mark that question and move on to the next one. Let your mind go to work on it while you keep going.

When you are done with the multiple choice questions go back and take a quick look at the ones you didn't know. Often times the answer to one question is provided by another question later on and that fact becomes clear when you read it again. If you still don't know don't sweat it and move on to the essay questions. By the way don't fill out your bubble sheet until you are all done. No professor in the world is going to prevent you from filling in the bubbles even after they say "time". Just circle the right answer and fill in the bubbles when it's all over.

Shoot to finish the multiple choice in twenty to thirty minutes leaving you with eighty minutes or so for the essay questions. Pick the essay question that most closely matches one of the areas you outlined in your preparation for the exam. Picture the outline in your mind and sketch out the outline of the arguments if you can. The goal is to have an idea of what the answer to your essay is before you begin writing it. If you know the answer already all you have to do is provide rational evidence for your answer in the body of the essay. Students usually run into trouble with essays when they meander all over the place with their essay without coming to a convincing conclusion.

Make sure you use paragraphs as much as possible in the essay portion. Forcing yourself to break your ideas into short paragraphs will give the writing a natural structure without putting too much thought into it.

When you have completed the essay questions go back to your multiple choice answers and begin filling in the bubble sheet. When you come to one of your unanswered questions make your best guess. Don't worry about getting a question wrong, you usually have at least a twenty percent chance of getting lucky and if you get it wrong it won't kill you.

### **Conclusion**

There are no silver bullets in the learning process. Equal mixtures of luck, time management and hard work are required to consistently do well. If you are willing to put in the work the system-based method described above has the potential to make a huge difference in your performance in all your classes. It is especially effective for classes with exams designed like Professor Dunn's. Preparation is the key to success in most aspects of life and it is no different here.