Studying for My Western Civ Tests and Exams

My Western Civ tests consist of three sections: a small multiple-choice section, a larger short-answer section, and finally an essay. Here are my suggestions about how to go about studying for my tests.

**Multiple-Choice**

I think it is important for everyone to read the assigned textbook, but I also understand that remembering everything in a textbook is probably impossible for most people (assuming you don’t have photographic memory). Multiple-choice questions (on history tests anyway) mainly check recognition memory, which is the ability to recognize when you have seen something before. This is a relatively easy form of knowledge to acquire, and so I would hope that after reading a textbook, you would be able to recognize the right answer for some rather basic questions.

Nearly all of my multiple-choice questions are drawn from the textbook reading (I may, on occasion, also include questions from other readings that you do for the class). I tend to ask questions about names: names of people, names of events, or names of places. What I would suggest is going through the study guides that I provide and make sure you know all the names that I ask something about. It is very easy to write multiple-choice questions about names, so I tend to do this a lot. This could mean specific names that I mention; it could also mean names that I ask you to be familiar with. For example, the study guide could ask, who are some people associated with a specific artistic or ideological movement? You should go back into the textbook and find out which names are mentioned.

You should also peruse the reading guides for questions that look entirely new or strange—which is an indication that I haven’t covered a topic at all in the lectures. These questions also give me a good opportunity to find out that you did the textbook reading (as opposed to simply coming to lectures).

I will also sometimes ask more difficult questions that test some level of understanding. These are tougher to study for. Just make sure you have read the textbook, and then hope for the best. At worst, you might miss 2-4 points on these kind of questions.

**Short-Answer**

For many, this is the really difficult part of my exam. And it is very easy to lose lots of points here, so this is where you need to put in most of your study time.
This sections tests not simply recognition memory, but **recall memory**. Namely, you have to be able to recall information with no cues to help you. This is a more difficult level of knowledge to acquire, but it is also deeper and therefore more likely to stick with you in the long-term.

I demand on this section that you not only recall certain pieces of information (which will earn you half credit), but be able to explain why they are important (which will earn you full credit). This requires you to demonstrate a level of **comprehension**. In other words, if I ask you for four reasons that something happened, you shouldn’t simply spit back short phrases that you remember from the outlines, but you also need to explain why those phrases are, in fact, reasons.

The vast majority of my short-answer questions will come from my **outlines**. You need to learn the outlines very well. Don’t try to remember them word for word, or as an image; for most people, that won’t work. Instead, you should strive to comprehend how the outline hangs together.

My short-answer questions tend to focus on:

- examples of something;
- types of somethings;
- characteristics of something;
- causes for something;
- effects of something.

You should try to go through the outlines looking for these kinds of relationships. Here, you should check various levels of the outline: letters as they relate to Arabic numbers (C—1,2,3,4), Roman numerals as they relate to letters (IV-A,B,C), but don’t forget Roman Numerals as they relate to one another (I, II, III, IV).

Examples:

i) From the “French Revolutionary Europe” outline, I could ask, What are the five major beliefs of early-nineteenth century conservatism? [This is an “example of” question.] You should tell me something about the arrogance of the French Revolution, the power of tradition, traditional monarchies, aristocracy and social hierarchy, and religion.

ii). From the “Responses to Industrialization” outline, I could ask, What are five major economic and social changes of the 1500s to 1700s that laid the groundwork for industrialization? [This is a “causes of” question.] You would need to tell me something about commercial development of Europe, the agricultural revolution, proto-industrialization, population growth, and expansion of consumption.
A hint for actually answering the short-answer questions. You need to explain yourself, but you don’t need to write an essay about every point. You will generally get 2 points for every aspect of the question you talk about. You need to write, therefore, just enough to get 2 points and then move on, otherwise you will run out of time. So, if I ask you for 5 characteristics of something, write 2-3 sentences (roughly) for every characteristic: one sentence for the phrase, perhaps another sentence to serve as an explanation of the characteristics, and then (if possible) and example of the characteristic. Then STOP!

**Essay**

Studying the outlines and learning them well will not only allow you to get through the very difficult short-answer section, it will also give you a wealth of information in your mind that you can use on your essays.

The essay question, though, will ask you not simply to recall information, or even to explain the information, but to go further. This is the point where you show me you can do some higher-order thinking skills. You should show me you can **apply** the information you have learned to a specific problem. You should hopefully be able to do some **analysis**, especially by perhaps seeing some patterns among the information that you have learned and also maybe seeing how different aspects of what you have learned may connect together. The most difficult thing I would hope you could do is **begin to synthesize** some of the information you have learned, by bringing information that you have learned in different contexts (different lectures, or lectures vs. readings) together to drawn conclusions.

In short, this is my opportunity to test your **critical thinking skills**—those higher levels of thinking that all college students need to be able to do. So, be ready to put on your “thinking caps” in the exam. You are going to need to do more than recall information; for the essay especially, you will have to figure a few things out for yourself.

In one way, though, essays are easier than the short-answer questions. With the short-answer questions, I am trying to find out what you don’t know; with the essay, you have the chance to **tell me what you do know**. So put everything down that you can: examples that you may have learned, dates that you happen to remember, people that you know something about. Pack the essay with as much information as possible in the time you have.

Organize your thoughts for a few minutes, and then write, write, write. Try not to stare at the paper too long. I can’t grade what’s not on the paper. So keep that pen moving and try to think at the same time.