

How to Write an Exam Reference Sheet

A number of courses allow a single 8.5 x 11 in. reference sheet as an exam aid. Properly prepared, such a sheet can be helpful on an exam, and compiling one can be an excellent way to study. Here are some recommendations to get the most out of your allowed reference sheet:

- **Clarity is more important than completeness.** Your time to write the exam is limited, and time spent searching a dense reference sheet for the one thing you're *sure* you put on there is generally wasted. Whitespace, clear page layout, and a readable print size will make your notes easier (and quicker) to find during those crucial in-exam minutes. I have seen students shrink pages of notes down to 1/16 size, but magnifying glasses are generally forbidden in the exam room.
- **Writing the sheet yourself is a valuable study aid.** While it may be tempting to short-circuit this process, you will be able to make better use of a sheet you create yourself. Also, the process of building one can be a helpful aid to study — I suggest building a first draft by writing down anything useful you're worried you won't remember as you review your notes and other course materials. If this first draft ends up too long, decide what parts are least needed on your reference sheet and memorize them instead of including them on the final reference sheet. By the time you are done compiling a reference sheet by this method, you will have studied the material thoroughly enough that you may not need it.
- **Computer typesetting can be helpful or not.** Depending on how neat your handwriting is and what material you want to include, it may be easier to build your reference sheet on a computer or to hand-write it. A print-out is generally neater than your own writing, but it may be more time-consuming than it is worth to include figures and equations or do complex page layout on a computer — these can be produced much more quickly by hand. You may also consider adding hand-written annotations to a printed reference.