

How Should You Study Organic Chemistry?

Of course, do the assigned homework problems. Next, here it is, the most important and useful free advice you will ever get. It turned me into a straight A student. You WILL succeed if you follow this approach faithfully. Study by completing three tasks EVERY WEEK.

1) Outline the lecture notes every week. That is, rewrite your notes using the fewest possible words, in outline format, with arrows connecting related ideas. The best way to think about this is the following; pretend you would be allowed to bring a few pieces of paper, i.e. "cheat sheets" to each exam*, what would be on those pieces of paper from the lectures that would guarantee you would get 100% correct on the exam. You need to do this every single week, not just before the exams! *Sorry, we give only closed book exams.

2) Outline the reading sections every week. You will have reading homework assigned after almost every class. Put together outlines of this material every night. Don't just read and purge, make an outline while you read. It really does not take long.

3) Keep your roadmap up to date every week. A roadmap shows all of the types of organic molecules (alkanes, alkenes, alcohols, alkyl halides, etc.) and with arrows drawn between them, the appropriate reagents and/or reaction conditions written over the arrows, and the stereochemistry/regiochemistry written below the arrow as applicable. Preparing a roadmap is the very best way I know of to keep track of reactions and mechanisms so that you can use reactions in synthesis problems. It gives you the "big picture" in a straightforward way. For a much more detailed description of a roadmap, see the web page.

Reasons to study using the above method:

1) This will greatly increase the learning process by organizing the important concepts in your mind.

2) It will focus your attention on any problems you have understanding the material before it is too late.

3) You will then be prepared to better comprehend the material presented the following week in lecture. New material invariably builds upon old material. Get behind at any time and you can kiss it good-bye.....

4) When it comes time to study for exams, especially finals, the problem is always time management. How can you most effectively use precious study time? Well, this is the best part of the method. Instead of reading over many pages of lecture notes and hundreds of book pages, you will only have to study what is on your highly condensed, few sheets of paper. While others are trying to figure out what to study, you are simply looking over a few pages with all the essential information WRITTEN IN YOUR OWN WORDS! After this review, do representative homework or practice problems and you will be ready for the exam!

5) Your study time has been broken down into tasks. When you are done outlining and filling in your roadmap, you are finished. Go have fun!

This approach to studying saved my rear end in college, and my former students have often said it greatly improved their grades for the rest of their careers here at UT. The most important thing to remember: do this every week, not just before exams.