

FCS(SA) Finals survival guide

By Marissa Joubert

The time has arrived to take that final step in achieving what you have been working towards for many long years and it is, quite frankly, terrifying.



This is not aimed at making you feel better with meaningless platitudes like “You’ll be fine” or “It’s not that bad”. Truth of the matter is it is as bad as you imagine it to be. Unless you have done finals in another specialty previously this will be the most stressful experience of your career thus far. The good news, however, is that it is survivable.

Here are some useful tips to make the experience less painful:

Have a plan and stick to it as much as possible

The syllabus is huge and it is easy to feel overwhelmed. Formulate a clear plan and divide topics in sections, that way it feels less intimidating and ensures that you cover all the aspects of a topic.

Everyone uses a different tactic to study but a solid plan is to first take time to collect all the info and resources on a topic and then roughly summarize it. Once you have covered all the necessary topics you can then take time to refine your summaries.

An easy way to decide how you’re going to divide a topic is to take a textbook like Sabiston or Greenfield’s and page through the table of contents – that way you know which aspects of a topic need to be covered.

You will also need to have a timeline. As the syllabus is so huge it is also very easy to get lost in a topic and spend days or weeks on it if you are not strict with yourself. Just remember to give yourself a little bit of leeway in your time allocation as we all have those weeks where one disastrous call follows on another and leaves you out for the count for a couple of days.

Get a study partner

Misery loves company. I don’t think there is a truer time for this adage than during your finals preparation. A study partner helps to maintain your sanity and lightens the workload. It helps a lot if someone can help to look for resources and make summaries and to have the sympathetic ear of someone that is sharing this experience. Pick a study partner that has the same work ethic as you do to prevent adding extra stress to an already stressful experience.

Don’t forget the basic sciences

Surgeons are after all applied anatomists. You won’t fail if you don’t know what the latest trial on the use of sorafenib in hepatocellular carcinoma showed but you will if you don’t

know what the triangle of Calot is. There is also an entire oral on surgical pathology and having a solid understanding of basic physiology will help tremendously in trying to figure out pathophysiology. Surgical technique is also very important and is extensively tested in both the written and oral exam.

Allow yourself enough time to summarize topics but don't forget that you will still need to memorize those summaries

It's very easy to spend so much time collecting material and making summaries that you forget that what's on the paper needs to go into your head. You will need at least 6 months after collecting all the material to memorize it.

Textbooks alone are not sufficient

The bad news is that textbooks are already out of date when they are published. It takes a lot of time to compile, edit and publish a textbook and by the time it is published the information contained in it is at least 3 – 5 years old. In an ever evolving field like surgery this is not good enough. Get recent review articles on the important topics. Up to date is a good resource but it tends to focus on a lot of medical background and not a lot of surgical technique. Surgical clinics of North America have a lot of very useful review articles on a number of topics and it even covers anatomy, embryology, physiology and surgical technique.

Ask your predecessors for advice and help

There is no better resource than someone who has just passed the exam. They have useful tips on resources to use, study technique and practical tips on how to survive.

A lot of the practical part of the exam is about having the guts to show up and stick to your guns

During the clinical and oral examination you will be second guessed with every statement you make. Don't get discouraged, it's all part of the process, apparently.

Tutorials help

Get the input of every consultant at your disposal, get tutorials as frequently as you can. Most consultants are more than willing to help. Talking over a subject really helps to cement it, expose gaps and clear up confusion.

Practice answering written questions

The single biggest complaint about the written exam is: "There isn't enough time". Practice answering written questions to prepare yourself for this. You can start by doing it open book with unlimited time but as it gets closer to the written start doing it closed book and timed. You will soon realize that 45 minutes to answer a 100 mark question is nowhere near enough time and learn to package your answers to highlight the important points as briefly as possible.

Practice orals and exam cases

The practical part of the examination is nerve wrecking but if you have practiced doing orals it does come somewhat automatically. A study partner is invaluable in this part of the preparation. It helps if you're good enough friends that they can play the part of brutal examiner without any hurt feelings.

Attend refresher courses

Having a topic explained to you by an expert in the field definitely helps to clear up any lingering confusion and it helps if the people who are actually going to be examining you tell you exactly what will be expected of you.

Good luck guys!!!!