



# Test Taking Tips



## PREPARING FOR AND TAKING TESTS

Tests measure how you are doing in a course. Usually test scores are the key determinants of your course grade. Doing well on tests requires test-taking skills, a purposeful positive attitude, strategic thinking and planning, and naturally, a solid grasp of the course content. This handout contains tips that apply to all types of tests.

### I. HOW TO PREPARE FOR TESTS

- A. Familiarize yourself with the test. Ask the professor how long it will be and what kind of questions will be on it. Ask your instructor which concepts are most important, which chapters to focus on, and what you will have to do on the test. Also ask for some sample test questions, and whether there is a copy of a similar test on file in a library. Look over the tests you have already taken in the course to predict what you will need to prepare for. Your aim is to determine both the content of the questions and the type of memory/intellectual skills you will be asked to use. Examples of these skills include:
1. Remembering specific facts, details, terms, and definitions.
  2. Comparing, contrasting and otherwise interpreting meaning in the information studied.
  3. Applying principles and theories to solve problems that may not have been covered explicitly in the materials.
  4. Predicting possible outcomes given a set of variables.
  5. Evaluating the usefulness of certain ideas, concepts, or methods for a given event or situation.
- B. Overview all the work to be done and schedule time to do it. On the basis of your familiarity with the test, make a list of all the tasks you must complete to prepare for it. Given what topics you expect to be most important on the test, set priorities among your study tasks and plan to do the most important ones first. In scheduling your test preparation work keep as much as possible to your own routines. If you do not know how to make a study schedule pick up the Counseling Center's handouts on time management.
- C. Avoid the "escape syndrome." If you find yourself fretting or talking about your work rather than studying, relax for a few minutes and rethink what you are doing – reappraise your priorities and if necessary rethink your study plan to address your worries and then **START WORKING**.
- D. Deal with unread materials – succinctly. Approach your unread material keeping in mind all of your study plan, how much time you have to catch up on your reading, and what it is you need to pull out of the reading. Preview the material, dividing it up into parts, looking for the organizational scheme of the work. Decide what parts in the reading you can omit, what parts you can skim, and what parts you want to read. Set time limits for each part, and keep to the limits. Use the following techniques to help move through the reading:

1. Skim all the reading material first (except the parts you have decided to omit) so you will have at least looked at everything before the test. Take notes on what you skim.
  2. Read, emphasizing key sentences and concentrating on understanding the ideas expressed. Try editorializing as you read by asking yourself questions regarding WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN, and HOW about the information.
  3. Recite the material to yourself immediately, self testing at the end of each part to enhance recall even without later review.
- E. Review actively. Integrate notes, test, and supplementary information onto summary sheets by diagramming, charting, outlining, categorizing in tables, or simply writing summaries of the information. Try to create a summary sheet for each study session, or for each main idea, or for each concept. Use as many of the suggested ways possible, bringing all your senses as well as your sense of humor to bear on these summary sheets to make them really personally meaningful. The more of yourself you put into these sheets the better you will remember the information.
- F. Practice doing what you will be doing on the test. If you will be solving problems, then that is what you need to do while studying; if you will be conjugating Spanish verbs, then write these out. Answer unassigned problems or questions in the text or anticipate test questions by thinking frequently “If I were making up this test I would probably ask . . .,” and then answer your questions. Remember, the single most effective way to prepare for any test is to practice doing what you will have to do on the test.
- G. It is frequently useful to study with other well-prepared students and to attend any review sessions if available. Use these studying formats to clarify any questions you have about the materials and the test. Do not expect review sessions to repeat any lectures nor to present any additional information. The purpose of these sessions is to give you the opportunity to ask questions about the information to further your understanding.

## II. HOW TO TAKE TESTS

- A. Be prepared emotionally and physically as well as intellectually. Get into a “fighting” attitude, emotionally ready to do your best. Stay away from others right before the test. Anxiety is highly contagious. Focus on what you know rather than on what you do not know; reinforce your strengths and arrest your weaknesses. Get your rest the night before a test, eat well balanced meals, keep up with your regular exercise – prepare your brain for optimum functioning by keeping your physical resources well maintained. Avoid fasts; do not take any stimulants you are not used to, and if you are used to them (i.e., coffee or soft drinks) keep within moderate amounts.
- B. Arrive at the test room early enough to arrange your working conditions, establishing a calm and alert mode. Select a seat where the lighting is the best (frequently at the front of the room), and where your view of the other students will be minimized.
- C. When you receive your test, use the back to jot down all the information you are worried you might forget. Remember first to ask whether you can write on the test form itself.
- D. Preview the whole test before beginning to answer any questions. Make sure your copy has no missing or duplicate pages. Ask the instructor or proctor to clarify any ambiguities. Read the directions carefully. Budget your time carefully. Check yourself at 15-20 minute intervals to see if you are on track.

- F. Start with the easy questions to build your confidence and to gain time for the harder ones. Work the entire test: put some answer down for each question even if you must guess (unless there is a “correction for guessing”). If you find yourself blocked, move on to the next question.
- G. Do not panic if you see a question that you did not anticipate or prepare for. Use everything you know about the content of the course, the instructor’s explanations, and your own reasoning ability to analyze the question and create a logical answer. Go for partial credit when you know you cannot get all the points: if you have studied you are bound to know something. Don’t answer too fast. Ponder each question, but don’t agonize over them since it may keep you from getting to other questions.
- H. Read the question as is. Avoid overanalyzing or oversimplifying, or you will end up answering a question that exists only in your mind, not on the grading key. Answer the question the test maker intended: interpret the test within the scope of the course.
- I. Organize the subject material using charts, diagrams, or time lines whenever possible.
- J. Know your professors and his/her biases.

### III. HOW TO ANALYZE RETURNED TESTS

- A. If you receive your test back to keep, rework your errors trying to reason out why the correct answer was correct.
- B. If you do not receive your test back, visit your instructor’s office to take a look at your answer sheet and the questions you missed.
- C. Look for the origin of each question – test, notes, labs, supplementary reading, etc.
- D. Identify the reason you missed questions. Did you fail to read it correctly? Did you fail to prepare for it? Was the test at a more difficult level than you prepared for? Did you run out of time?
- E. Check the level of detail and skill of the test. Were most of the questions over precise details and facts or were they over main ideas and principles? Did the questions come straight from the test or did the test maker expect you to make sophisticated transformations and analysis?
- F. Did you have any problems with anxiety or blocking during the test?

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## TIPS FOR SPECIFIC TYPES OF EXAMINATIONS

### I. Objective Exams

#### A. General Hints

1. Answer the easy questions first.
2. Avoid mechanical errors (putting answers in wrong place and misreading directions).
3. If machine scored, erase completely and no stray marks.
4. Know the scoring rules or formula and plan accordingly (guess if there is not a sizeable penalty for wrong answers).
5. Later items may be useful in answering earlier ones.
6. First reactions or impressions tend to be the correct ones.
7. An exam is not a battlefield for proving your point. Select the answer the professor supports.
8. Do not think too hard about the choices – you could make a case for almost any choice if you try.
9. Do not change your answer because of a mere doubt; change only if you find clear indication that it is wrong and another right.
10. Always bear in mind that the professor is not attempting to trick you, so don't outsmart yourself looking for devious or tricky interpretations and ignoring the obvious.

#### B. True-False Questions

1. Do not assume that answers are in a certain order or pattern, e.g. TTF, TTF,TFT, TFT.
2. There are no exceptions to these qualifying words and others like them: all, alone, always, entirely, never, only, totally, etc.
3. Remember that a statement partly false should be marked false, but don't go out of your way to look for wild exceptions.
4. Guess if you don't know the answer.

### C. Multiple Choice Questions

1. Read through the questions with the answer.
2. Look for clues (e.g., grammar, tenses)
3. Guess if you don't know the answer.
4. Work backwards—read the answers, then the question.
5. Choose the best alternative (more than one answer may be correct).
6. Determine first what the question asks, throw out obvious misfits, and select the best answer after eliminating what you can.
7. Ask yourself the question before looking at the choices, then find one similar to your answer.
8. Watch out for the “except” type of question where all choices fit the question but one (you are looking for the item that does not belong).
9. The alternative differing most in length from the others tends to be correct.
10. Qualifying words like “usually” or “sometimes” tend to make choices correct: “always” and “never” tend to make choices incorrect.

### D. Matching Questions

1. Ask if you can use alternatives more than once.
2. Do not match if you are not sure.
3. Take each entry in turn in the left column and try to think of the answer before reading the choices.
4. Choose the best answer and mark the answer sheet according to the directions.
5. Avoid changing answers.
6. Beware of lists with more answers than questions.
7. Do those items of which you are certain first; by eliminating some, the remaining choices may be correctly guessed.

## E. Short Answer

1. Pay attention to grammar.
2. Answer within the context of the course.
3. Use terms the instructor used.
4. If you are having a problem, answer by giving an example.
5. Beef up your answers if you have time.

## F. Fill-in-the-blank

1. Look for clues (e.g., grammar, tenses).
2. Use common sense.
3. Choose the best word.
4. Pay attention to the length of line give or to the number of lines.
5. Read through after you answer to make sure it sounds right.

## G. Problem Solving

1. Read the question.
2. Re-read getting important information.
3. If there is a multiple option, estimate your answer.
4. Work backwards (e.g.,  $2 + 3 = 5$ ,  $5 - 2 = 3$ ).
5. Watch for careless errors.

## II. Essay Exams (Discussions measuring your ability to recall, to explain, and to discuss).

### A. Variations on essay questions.

1. Compare and give similarities and differences.
2. Describe, define, list, evaluate (give judgment).
3. Discuss, explain, outline, contrast (give differences only).
4. Give a certain number – 3 reasons, 2 advantages, 4 causes
5. Express a certain point of view – yours, the instructors, the textbook author's.
6. Illustrate by examples, diagrams, or tables.

- B. Use the first minute or two to read the instructions and questions (note point values for the different parts of tests). Re-read questions. (Pay attention and know the meaning of key words).
- C. Set up a time schedule – stop when time is up for a question and begin the next one. (Several incomplete answers usually receive more credit than one thoroughly answered question).
- D. Outline the answer briefly before writing.
- E. Writing the answer
  - 1. To begin writing in the hope that the right answer will somehow turn up is time consuming and usually futile.
  - 2. To know a little and to present it well is superior to knowing much and presenting it poorly.
  - 3. Include an introduction and summary.
  - 4. Include details.
  - 5. Qualify answers when in doubt, e.g. “Toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century” rather than “In 1894.”
- F. Take time to re-read the paper.
  - 1. Did you do what each question asked you to do?
  - 2. Did you answer the correct number of questions?
  - 3. Did you answer all parts of questions (or the number of parts indicated by the directions?)
  - 4. Did you check for: misspelled words, omitted words, grammatical errors, mistakes in dates and figures?

## KEY WORDS IN ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Compare Bring out points of similarity and points of difference. Compare the legislative branches of the state government and the national government.
2. Contrast Bring out the points of difference. Contrast the novels of Jane Austen and William Makepeace Thackeray.
3. Criticize State your opinion of the correctness or merits of an item or issue; criticism may approve or disapprove. Criticize the increasing use of executive agreement in international negotiations.
4. Define Give the meaning of a word or concept, place it in the class to which it belongs, and set it off from other items in the same class. Define the term "archetype."
5. Describe Give an account of; tell about; give a word picture of. Describe the Pyramids of Giza.
6. Discuss Talk over; consider from various points of view; present the different sides of. Discuss the use of pesticides in controlling mosquitoes.
7. Enumerate Name over; one after another; list in concise form. Enumerate the great Dutch painters of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.
8. Evaluate Give the good points and the bad ones; appraise; give an opinion; regard the value of; talk over the advantages and limitations. Evaluate the contributions of teaching machines.
9. Explain Make clear; interpret; make plain; tell "how" to do; tell the meaning of. Explain how man can, at times, trigger a full-scale rainstorm.
10. Interpret Make Plain; give the meaning of; give your thinking about; translate. Interpret the poetic line, "The sound of a cobweb snapping is the noise of my life."
11. Illustrate Use a word picture, a diagram, a chart, or a concrete example to clarify a point. Illustrate the use of catapults in the amphibious warfare of Alexander.
12. Justify Show good reasons for; give evidence; present facts to show your position. Justify the American entry into World War II.
13. Prove Establish the truth of something by giving factual evidence or logical reasons. Prove that in a full-employment economy, a society can get more of one product only by giving up another.
14. Summarize Sum up; give the main points briefly. Summarize the ways in which man preserves food.
15. Trace Follow the course or trail of; give a description of progress. Trace the development of television in school instruction.