Step Eight

Use Test-Taking Strategies

In order to do well on any test, you must study hard and be prepared. Having done that, you can further improve your test performance by using these test-taking strategies.

Get off to a good start. Have everything you need for the test (pencil, erasable pen, calculator, etc.). If you have a couple of minutes before the test starts, try to relax. Think about something else or talk to your classmates. As soon as you get your test, write anything that you want to remember (facts, dates, equations, formulas, memory aids, etc.) in light pencil at the top of your test. Put your name on your test, and read the directions carefully.

Develop a plan. Before you begin answering questions, quickly look over the entire test and develop a plan. For example, if a one-hour test has 25 multiple-choice questions and 2 essay questions, you could plan 10 minutes for the multiple-choice questions, 20 minutes for each essay question, and 10 minutes to check over your answers.

Mark the questions that you want to return to. As you go through the test, put a dot or light check mark by any answer you're not sure of. After you have gone through all of the questions, go back to the ones you've marked and try them again.

Don't panic if you don't know the answers to the first few questions. Sometimes it takes a few minutes for your brain to get in gear. Chances are you'll know the answers when you come back to them later.

"If you're not sure of an answer, always go with your first instinct." (Greg)

Increase your odds on multiple-choice questions.

- As you're reading a multiple-choice question, try to come up with the answer in your head before you look at the choices.
- If you're not sure of an answer, eliminate the choices you know are incorrect by crossing them out. Then make an educated guess.
- If two of the choices are similar or opposite, probably one of them is the correct answer.

- Read all of the answer choices. There will probably be at least a couple of choices that sound like they could be correct; don't be tempted to mark the first one that sounds good.

"Use the test to help you take the test. Sometimes questions give you information that can help you answer other questions." (John)

Look for key words in True/False questions. Statements with *always, never, every, all,* and *none* in them are usually false. Statements with *usually, often, sometimes, most,* and *many* in them are usually true. Read True/False questions very carefully; one word will often determine whether a statement is True or False.

Know how to approach essay questions.

- Read each essay question and then start with the easiest one. This will help you gain confidence, and it will give you time to think about how to answer the harder questions. Be sure to note how many points each essay is worth, and adjust the time you allot to each question accordingly.
- Before you do any writing, brainstorm. Jot down the key words, ideas, and points that you want to cover in your answer. If you have time, organize these ideas and points into a simple outline, if not, just number them in the order you want to present them.
- Begin writing. Write legibly, and use clear, concise, complete sentences. (Studies have shown that when two identical essays are graded, the one that's easier to read gets the higher grade.) In your opening paragraph, state the question and tell the reader what he/she can expect to learn from your essay. In your middle paragraphs, present examples, details, evidence, and facts to support the points you're making. In your final paragraph, restate main points, and write a quick summary. Finally, reread your entire essay and make corrections.
- If you don't know the answer to an essay question, take a couple of minutes to write what you do know about that subject. You might hit on something and get partial credit. If you don't have time to complete an essay, write your teacher a note explaining that you ran out of time, and then briefly list the points you would have covered. Again, you might get partial credit.

Improve your math test scores. 1) Before you start to solve a problem, try to estimate what the answer will be. 2) If you're having difficulty with a problem, try drawing a picture or a diagram. 3) Don't spend too much time on one problem. If you get stumped, go on and come back to it later. 4) Show all of your work. Even if you get the wrong answer, if you were on the right track, you may get partial credit.

Be prepared for open book tests. During an open-book test, you must be able to locate information quickly. To help you do this, 1) highlight your notes, 2) put self-stick notes or bookmarks in your textbook to help you locate important information, and 3) rewrite all of the information you know you'll need on a separate sheet of paper.

Check your answers. If you have time, check all of your answers, even the ones you know are correct. You may have read the question wrong or made a careless mistake.

"Always use all the time that you're given." (Kathy)

Go over all returned tests. Once your test is returned, go over each question you missed and write in the correct answer. You may see one or more of these questions again. Also check to make sure your test was graded correctly. (Teachers sometimes make mistakes.) Keep a record of your test scores, and file all returned tests in your folders.

Step Eight Review

Use Test-Taking Strategies

- **Get off to a good start.**
- **Develop a plan.**
- **Mark the questions that you want to return to.**
- **Increase your odds on multiple-choice questions.**
- **Look for key words in True/False questions.**
- **Know how to approach essay questions.**
- **Improve your math test scores.**
- **Be prepared for open book tests.**
- **Check your answers.**
- **Go over all returned tests.**

Step Nine

Reduce Test Anxiety

A little anxiety before a test improves your concentration and alertness. Excessive worry, or test anxiety, will lower your test scores.

It's possible for students with test anxiety to get themselves so worked up that they can't think clearly. The brain is like a computer in that it contains a great deal of information. This information is useless, however, if you're not able to "access" it when you need it. Having test anxiety is like not having the password to your computer. The information is there, but you can't get to it.

To reduce test anxiety, study enough to feel confident that you know the material. Then try to replace the worry and negative thinking with thoughts that are positive and relaxing. Some of the following suggestions may help you:

- Start studying early. The night before a test, review the material and get a good nights sleep. Cramming increases test anxiety.
- Mentally practice going through the testing experience. Close your eyes and see yourself calmly and confidently walking into the test. See yourself answering the questions correctly, and then see yourself receiving the grade that you want. Go through this mental imagery exercise several times before the day of the test.
- Walk into the test with your head up and your shoulders back. How you act can definitely affect how you feel. If you act confident, you just may find that you feel more confident.
- Here are five common relaxation techniques that you might want to try: 1) Take a deep breath, hold it, and then slowly release the breath and the tension. Do this until you feel your body relax. 2) Start at the top of your head, flexing and then relaxing each part of your body. 3) Close your eyes and visualize warm sunshine washing over you, melting away the tension and relaxing all of your muscles. 4) Close your eyes and let your arms hang down at your sides. As you relax, visualize the tension from your head, neck, and shoulders flowing down your arms and out through your fingertips. 5) Think of a place where you feel very relaxed and calm. Close your eyes and visualize being in that place.