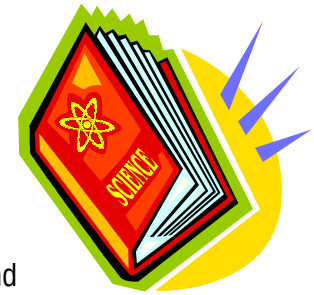
Managing Test Anxiety: Ideas for Students

Tests and quizzes are more widely used in schools than ever. Teachers rely on written examinations to show whether students have learned the information presented in the course. Colleges and universities evaluate applicants' performance on entrance examinations such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) to judge whether these applicants are likely to be successful in their programs.

With so much depending on test results, it is no wonder that students often become anxious about taking tests. But don't worry! You can master test-anxiety and improve your performance on exams by following a simple plan: develop good study habits, use effective techniques to memorize content, take steps to reduce test anxiety, and take advantage of smart strategies when taking the test. Read through the tips below for ideas that you can use:



Effective Study Habits

It is not enough just to schedule lots of study time. You also need to make sure that you use effective study *techniques*. Some smart study tips are to:

- *Create a quiet, neat study area.* Distractions and clutter interfere with studying. Select a quiet spot where you are unlikely to be interrupted and organize it so that you can study efficiently. If space is cramped at home, use a corner of the local library or other suitable spot as your 'study haven.'

- *Study from good notes.* Your study sessions will be productive only if you are studying from a legible and complete set of notes. If your notes are incomplete, see if your teacher has a loaner set of master class notes that you can review to get the missing information. Or ask a classmate who takes thorough notes if you can borrow them.

- *Use bits of unexpected free time to study*. Carry 'pocket work' with you to review whenever you have a few minutes of free time. For example, have a set of index cards with course notes on hand that you can conveniently pull out and look at during spare moments.

- *Make a study schedule to avoid 'time-drains'*. People often don't realize how much time they spend on activities such as watching TV, surfing the Internet, talking with friends on the phone, and so on. If we aren't careful, though, we may discover that our leisure activities 'drain away' time that could have been better used for study. Create a general study schedule, with time set aside for fun activities. Then be sure to limit those fun activities to the time allotted.

- *Take advantage of your peak energy levels.* Pick the time of day when you tend to have the most energy and try to schedule your study sessions at this time. Also, study your most difficult or challenging material first, while you are still fresh. When you study at the same time each day, you will also find that studying begins to turn into a habit!

- *Create a study group.* Gather together classmates to form a study group. Groups can make studying more fun. Another advantage of groups is that its members can consult multiple sets of notes whenever a course concept is unclear. (Just be sure that your group takes studying seriously and

doesn't spend too much time socializing!)

- *Teach content as a 'learning check'.* A very effective way to check whether you have learned course content is to try to teach that information to another person (e.g., to a study partner). The challenge of having to put key concepts into your own words and make them understandable to others will quickly reveal whether you have truly mastered that information.

- *Recite information aloud.* One study trick is to recite important information aloud. As you *say* the information, you also *hear* yourself saying it. These two channels for language, *speaking* and *hearing*, help to embed the information in your memory.

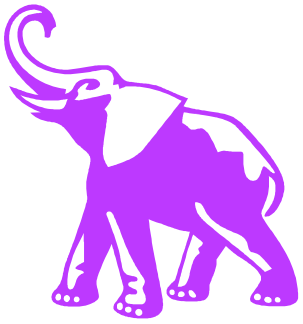
- *Pose difficult questions.* When studying, stop every so often and ask yourself, *"What question(s) or problem type(s) am I most afraid will be on the test?"* Your answer will give you a valuable hint about what parts of the course content you still find difficult and should spend the most time studying.

- *Don't forget to review previously learned material.* As you study, you start to learn the material. But a single pass through your notes is usually *not* enough to cement learning. During each study period, set aside time (e.g., at the start of the session) to review previously learned information or concepts. Remember, review, review, review!

- *Avoid cram sessions.* Pulling all-night study sessions only tires you out and leaves you exhausted on the day of the test. (And people seldom think clearly when they are tired…) Rather than cramming your review into one or two marathon sessions, break your study up into short periods and study more frequently. Also, start studying early in the course, well before the first test, to give yourself a head start in learning the material.

- *Reward yourself.* Select an activity that you find rewarding (e.g., watching a favorite videotape, going for a walk, calling a friend). Set a contract with yourself to complete a set amount of studying (e.g., to study chemistry for 90 minutes). If you have met your short-term study goal at the end of the study period, give yourself the reward.

Tips to Memorize Content



The best way to remember information from your notes or reading is to set aside enough time to study it well. Some tips for memorizing information are to:

- *Read and review using SQ3R.* The SQ3R approach is a structured, thorough method for learning the content of a book chapter or section: (1) ***S****urvey* the chapter, to get an overview of what it contains. Read through the chapter summary and all headings. Also, briefly take note of figures, tables, and illustrations. (2) Create ***Q***uestions based on each of the chapter headings. The questions should be similar to those that you might find on a test. (3) ***R***ead through the chapter. As you read, do your best to answer the questions that you developed. (4) ***R***ecite the questions. From memory, verbally answer each question. (Hint: You can learn even more effectively if you write down your answers. Your responses can be written as single words or short phrases so long as they capture the main content of the answer.) (5) ***R***eview your answers. Compare your responses to the information in the text to make sure that your answers are complete and accurate.

- *Make up flashcards.* To memorize vocabulary, write the key word or term on one side of an index card and the definition on the other side. To review, read off the word and recite the definition from memory before flipping the card over and checking your answer. Then review the cards again, this time reading the definitions and recalling the key word or term from memory. To memorize other information, copy a fact or concept on one side of the card and a 'test' question matching the concept on the card's flip side. To review, read off each question and attempt to recall the answer before flipping the card over to check your work.

- *Create acronyms or acrostics.* When you want to remember words or concepts in sequence, you can sometimes combine the first letters of the words into an *acronym*. For example, the color spectrum of visible light is: ***R***ed-***O***range-***Y***ellow-***G***reen-***B***lue-***I***ndigo-***V***iolet. Generations of students have memorized this sequence as the acronym (and fanciful name) ROY G. BIV.

  An *acrostic* is a sentence made up of words whose initial letters are memory cues. For example, biology classifies living organisms according to their place in the following categories: ***K***ingdom-***Ph***ylum-***C***lass-***O***rder-***F***amily-***G***enus-***S***pecies. Many students have memorized this sequence using the sentence, "***K***ing ***Ph***illip ***C***ame ***O***ver ***F***rom ***G***ermany ***S***wimming."

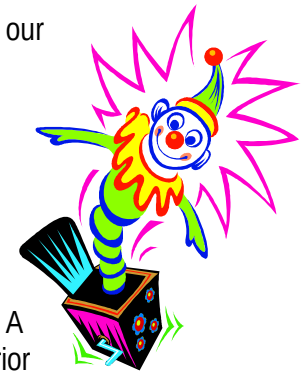
- *Use visualization tricks.* Because we often think in pictures, we can use our 'mind's eye' to help to memorize information as mental images. (Hint: Silly images can often make the information even easier to recall!) Here are a couple of ideas for memorizing a list of words or key terms:

  1. *Chaining*. First, think of an object to represent each word or term that you must commit to memory. Then construct a mental 'chain' that connects the objects in a short sequence. If, for example, you wanted to memorize the first four planets (Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars), you might visualize a winged god (*Mercury*) planting a *Venus* flytrap in a pile of *earth* and surrounding it with *Mars* bars.

  2. *Familiar places*. Select a location that is quite familiar to you (e.g., your house or apartment). Next, think of an object to represent each word or term that you must commit to memory. Then mentally 'place' the objects at various places in the location. If you wished to remember the first four planets, for example, you might first pick your kitchen as a familiar location. Then you might imagine that a statue of *Mercury* is sitting on the stove, a *Venus* flytrap is sitting in the sink, a pile of *earth* is spilled on the floor, and two *Mars* bars are sitting on the counter.

Tips to Reduce Anxiety About Tests

A little nervousness before a test can be good. It motivates us to work hard and put forth our best effort on the examination. When we become too anxious, though, that anxiety can undermine our confidence and interfere with our ability to solve problems. Some tips to reduce test anxiety are to:



- *Remember to take care of yourself first.* You should be sure to eat healthy foods and to get enough sleep before a test. After all, sleepy, hungry people are not in the best frame of mind to perform well on tests! You may also want to engage in moderate physical activity or exercise prior to taking the test to reduce body tension. A student who gets a full night's sleep, goes for a jog, and eats a balanced breakfast prior

to the test will improve the odds of doing his or her best on an examination and avoiding the 'testing jitters.'

- *Take practice exams.* People are less likely to become anxious when doing something that is familiar. If your instructor gives you the opportunity to take practice exams, take advantage of the opportunity to study the tests and become familiar with their format and style. During a study period, take the practice exam under the same conditions that you would take the real exam. (For example, if notes are not allowed during the test, do not look at your notes when taking the practice exam. If the test is timed, observe the same time limit when completing the practice exam.)

- *Come prepared.* Arrive at the test site early. Make a special effort to bring all materials, including extra pens, pencils, paper, etc. By showing up on time and prepared, you will not have to waste valuable energy worrying about small details and become distracted from the real goal: doing your best.

- *Make an effort to relax periodically during the test.* During a test, you may feel yourself becoming tense or nervous. Whenever you feel the tension building, take a brief relaxation break, using whatever method works for you. Here are some simple relaxation ideas:

  - Take several deep breaths, exhaling slowly after each one. Visualize the tension draining from your body as you breathe out.
  - Tense your muscles and hold for 5 seconds, then relax. Repeat 3 times.
  - Think of a peaceful, quiet setting (e.g., the beach). Imagine yourself calm and relaxed in that setting.

- *Engage in positive self-talk.* Replace irrational negative thinking with positive self-talk. When you have studied hard for a test, for example, your confidence will be shaken if you think negative thoughts such as "I don't have a chance of passing this exam!" Instead, adopt an upbeat but realistic attitude: "I prepared carefully for this test. If I do my best, I have a good chance of passing it." One more tip: If your friends are nervous about the test, try to avoid talking with them about it. You don't want their anxiety to rub off on you!

Effective Test-Taking Strategies

Become familiar with the test that you are about to take and have a mental plan for how you will spend your time most productively during the examination. If you follow a positive plan of action as you take the test, you will be less likely to feel helpless or to be preoccupied with anxious thoughts. Here are some useful test-taking strategies:

- *Listen carefully to directions.* Make a point to listen closely to any test directions that are read aloud. Read through written directions at least twice before starting on a test section to ensure that you do not misinterpret them. Hint: If you are confused or unsure of the test directions, ask the teacher or test proctor to explain or clarify them. It is better to seek help to clear up any confusion that you may have than to run the risk of misunderstanding the directions and completing test items incorrectly.

- *Perform a 'brain dump'.* At the start of the test, write down on a sheet of scrap paper any facts or key information that you are afraid that you might forget. This 'brain dump' will help you to feel less anxious

about forgetting important content. Plus, you can consult this sheet of information as a convenient reference during the test.

- *Preview the test.* Look over the sections of the test. Think about the total amount of time that you have to complete the test. Look at the point values that you can earn on each section of the examination. Budget your total time wisely so that you don't spend too much time on test sections that contribute few points to your score.

- *Multiple-choice: Don't get sidetracked looking for patterns of answers.* Some people claim that students can do better on multiple-choice tests if they look for patterns in the answers. For example, the advice is often given that, on questions with four possible answers, teachers most frequently choose "C" as the correct response. In rare cases, such patterns may actually exist--but it is never a reliable strategy to count on tricks and short cuts to do well on a test. Instead, your best bet is to study hard and rely on your own knowledge of the subject to do well.

- *Multiple-choice: Don't rush.* On multiple-choice items, force yourself to read each possible choice carefully before selecting an answer. Remember, some choices *appear* correct at first glance but turn out to be wrong when you take a closer look.

- *Essay questions: Underline key terms.* Before writing your essay, it is a good idea to underline important terms that appear in the test question as a check on your understanding. Words such as *compare*, *contrast*, *discuss*, and *summarize* will give you clear direction on the form that your essay should take and the content that it should include.

- *Essay questions: Outline your answer before you write it*. No teacher wants to read a rambling essay that fails to answer the test question. You can improve the quality of your essay by first organizing your thoughts into a brief outline on scrap paper before you write it. Even a few short minutes of planning time can significantly improve the readability and organization of your essays. And don't forget to write neatly!

- *When in doubt…guess!* If the test does not penalize guessing, be sure that you write in a response for each test item, even if you don't know the answer.

- *Skip difficult items until last.* On timed tests, you should avoid getting bogged down on difficult items that can cause you to use up all of your time. Instead, when you find yourself stumped on a tough test item, skip it and go on to other problems. After you have finished all of the easiest test items, you can return to any skipped questions and try to answer them.

- *Use leftover time to check answers.* If you finish a test early, use the remaining time to check your answers. On multiple choice items, check to see that you answered all questions. Reread each written response to make sure that it makes sense, uses correct grammar, and fully answers the question.

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