Test Taking

> "I always seem to study the wrong things."
> "I stay up late studying and then I'm so tired I can't remember anything."
> "No matter how well I know the material, I always panic when it's time for a test."

These are common feelings students express when it comes to taking exams.

Just as an exam pulls everything together, and tests how well you have learned the material, all the study skills you develop such as reading texts, listening to lectures, and taking notes are designed to assist you as you prepare for exams. Proper time management skills are in part designed to provide you with adequate time to prepare for exams. For example, the fact that you have studied and reviewed material on a daily basis should mean that you have learned it well, and there should be no need for a five-hour cram session the night before the "big exam."

There are some general strategies that one can learn for test preparation and taking. There are also specific study strategies for different kinds of tests, such as essay, true/false, problem solving, and multiple choice. A discussion of these strategies follows.

General Strategies for Preparing for Tests:

The best way to make reviewing for tests easier is to keep up with the day-to-day assignments in your classes. A good goal is to complete all reading assignments and other homework several days before you're tested on the material. Leaving all reading assignments until the night before a test creates an impossible task; reviewing material you've already read is much simpler.

Take organized class notes. Date them and keep your reading and class notes for a given course in the same notebook or folder. This way, you won't waste valuable study time looking for misplaced notes.

Review regularly. Research has shown that students remember material better when they review it soon after their first exposure to the material and regularly thereafter. Make reviewing a regular part of your day-to-day schedule.

Plan ahead. When your instructor announces a test, write down the date of the exam, the type of test and the material to be covered. Keeping track of upcoming tests on a semester calendar is helpful.

Identify what to study. Try to identify what material your instructor is likely to include on a test. Look over earlier tests in the course that you have taken, and if they are available, tests from previous years. Feel free to ask the instructor to outline the topics that will be covered. Review your notes, as well as any handouts that have been distributed in class.

Study efficiently. Your studying will be most effective if you study when you're feeling most alert and energetic. Studying in blocks — an hour or so of study, followed by a ten-minute break — works well for many people. You'll remember the material better this way than if you try to cram everything into a single marathon study session. Minimize interruptions; a quiet, undisturbed environment allows you to concentrate better. As you begin your final review, focus on topics most likely to appear on the test. Make up questions that you would ask if you were the instructor and try to answer them in your own words. After you feel that you know the material, get together with some fellow students and ask each other questions. You may find that you've overlooked one or more important topics.

Stay calm. Sweaty palms? Nervousness? Irritability? Sleeplessness? These are all symptoms of test anxiety, which, if severe, can affect your performance on a test — even when you know the material. It is not surprising that many students suffer from test anxiety. Our society puts a lot of emphasis on achieving or doing well. This isn't all bad; a little anxiety can make you want to do your best and encourage you to study. However, if you're too anxious, you may panic and start forgetting what you've learned as soon as the test paper is in your hands. The following tips can help you stay calm.

Prepare well for the test. When you feel confident that you know the material, it's much easier to stay calm under pressure.

Practice your test-taking skills. Make up questions of the type that will be on the test and practice answering them.

Avoid last-minute review. If you're still studying some topics just before the test begins, you're likely to panic. Just before the test, it may be better to sit quietly and practice a relaxation technique such as deep breathing than to cram at the last minute.

Plan to review the material in depth over a period of several days before the test. Then, on the night before the test, do a light final review.

Don't upset your regular routine by staying up late (or all night) or getting up too early. Keeping to your regular schedule of sleep and meals will help you remain relaxed.

If you try these suggestions and still feel overly anxious about tests, talk to your instructors, academic advisors or counselors.

Review after the test. Always review tests as soon as they are returned to you. Look for the kinds of questions that gave you trouble, as well as facts that you might have missed. Find out the correct answers for anything you missed, and go back over your study notes to see what went wrong. (Some professors will even include a question that was missed by a lot of students on a future quiz or exam.) If there is a topic or procedure that you don't understand, get help. Go the instructor for help or, if available, get help from a tutor. Keep your old tests if your instructor allows you to do so. They can help you develop strategies for the next exam.

Strategies for Preparing for Different Types of Tests:

Objective Tests. Common types of objective tests include true/false, multiple choice, fill-in-the-blanks, and matching. Prepare for these by studying key facts, dates, and other specific material. Be sure to focus on important information. Don't try to memorize the entire textbook. You may want to write out lists of facts and definitions or make flash cards with brief questions on one side and the answers on the other. Flash cards are especially useful for learning dates of important events, formulas and equations. If you do use flash cards, shuffle them occasionally so your ability to recall material won't be limited to a specific order. For the same reason, you might sometimes want to use the card "backward." Some students find it helpful to use memory aids (mnemonics) to help them remember facts for objective tests. Although mnemonics can be helpful, avoid ones that are so complicated that they are more difficult to remember than the material you need to learn in the first place.

Problem Tests. Problem tests typically involve using a formula or applying a rule in a step-by-step process. Concentrate on learning key theorems, rules, formulas, and equations, and practice applying them to a variety of problems. Most textbooks include practice problems with the answers provided. Use these first, trying to do the problem without looking at the steps provided. If you get stuck, look at the practice problem. And if you can't work the problem, go back and make sure that you have gone through the proper steps. Then try another similar problem. If you have worked all the problems, find another textbook, which may have additional problems.

Essay Tests. Essay tests are especially challenging for many students because they call on your ability to interpret, organize, and apply information you have learned. In preparing for essay tests, you should concentrate on the "big picture." You'll still need to know facts — too general an answer won't be acceptable — but you also need to know the implications of the facts. Remember one of the techniques you learned from the textbook reading — turning main topic headings into questions — this often can provide potential test questions. Think about whether certain topics lend themselves to particular types of essay questions such as compare and contrast, trace the development of, and so forth. Try writing your answers on paper and checking them against your textbook and notes. "Are your answers complete and accurate?" "Are they well organized?" "Do they make sense?" Again, you might find it useful to exchange sample questions with friends. Group study sessions can be especially helpful in identifying likely essay questions.

As you read your text, in some way (with a check mark or an asterisk) mark those topics, which would make good essay questions. Then look at the group of essay topics that you have identified, and circle the two that you think your instructor would be most likely to use. Write the questions. Then take your essay test. Give yourself a realistic time limit -- about the same amount of time your instructor would allow for a test.

For each question, first quickly jot down the key facts and ideas that you'll need to include in your answer. Then organize these facts and ideas by making a brief, logical outline.

Following your outline, write out the answer to each question, in your own words. Cover the topic thoroughly, but don't write more than is necessary.

Before your time limit is up, take two or three minutes to check your work. Read your answers for completeness and correctness — both for content and for such matters as spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Look at your outline to make sure you have included all the important points you wanted to include. Finally, check each of your answers against the textbook and your notes. Correct and improve your answers — you might want to do this in a different colored pen, so that it would emphasize those areas you need to further review.

General Strategies for Taking Tests:

Assuming that you have prepared adequately for the test, the next thing to do is to get organized to take the test. This includes having a good night's sleep and eating breakfast (or lunch in the case of afternoon tests). It also includes arriving at the test room a minute or two early so you can take a few deep breaths to relax and get under control. Getting organized means making certain that you've brought the supplies or materials that you need. It is surprising how many students waste valuable test taking time looking for pencils, calculators, etc. at the last minute. Also, be sure you take a watch so you can keep track of time. It's probably best not to discuss the test with your classmates when you arrive at the test room. If someone mentions a topic that you didn't cover in your preparation, you might start worrying and have difficulty remember the material that you have studied.

Follow directions. Before starting a test, clear your mind of distracting thoughts and read all the directions carefully, both on the test paper and on the chalkboard. Listen to any additional directions provided by your teacher. If the directions are unclear, ask for clarification.

Plan your time. Always wear a watch to the exam. Begin the test by planning your time. Look quickly over the entire test and divide your time according to the number, type, and the point value of the questions. Generally, the amount of time you spend on a question should be related to its importance. Your plan should include extra time at the end of the test for a quick review of your work.

Read Thoroughly. Take time to read each question carefully and thoroughly before writing your answer. Make sure you understand exactly what the question asks and what you are to do in answering it. If you are allowed to write on the test paper, underline or circle key words. If you have no idea how to answer a question, go on to the next one. Put a mark next to each unanswered question and go back to them after you have completed the rest of the test.

Don't rush. Instructors are generally more impressed with thoroughness than by speed. Hurrying can lead to careless errors. Also, you are much more likely to get tense if you're feeling rushed.

Have a panic strategy. Give yourself a brief "time-out." To do this, quit work on the test, take slow, deep breaths and let yourself relax. Put the test temporarily out of your mind. Visualize yourself confidently resuming work on the test, turning in a completed test, and leaving the room with a feeling of having done your best work. Allow 20 or 30 seconds for your time-out.

Check your work. Always use any remaining time to check your work. Look for careless mistakes, omitted answers, etc.

Strategies for Taking DIfferent Kinds of Tests:

Objective Tests:

Don't answer each item in order. Work through the exam the first time answering only those items that you are sure of. During the second pass, you may find that some of the questions that initially stumped you may now seem easier; answer those during the second pass. Before the third pass, identify the items that you feel more confident about first and then, time permitting, complete those items that give you the most trouble. Unless there is a penalty for incorrect answers, answer every question to the best of your ability, even if you have to guess.

Read all answer choices. Read all the alternative answers before making your choice. To test for in-depth understanding, instructors often include answer choices that seem like possible choices but aren't quite correct.

Time yourself. Do not spend too much time on any one question.

Watch wording. Watch for words such as not or least, especially when they are not clearly set off through the use of underlining. Don't make careless errors because you only skimmed through the question. Also, watch for qualifying words such as all/most/some/none; always/usually/seldom/never; best/worst; highest/lowest; and smallest/largest.

Notice Negatives. Negatives can be either words such as "no," "not," "none," and "never" or prefixes such as "il," as in illogical; "un," as in uninterested; and "im," as in impatient. Negatives are common in objective tests. Negatives cause problems in objective questions because, like qualifiers, they can easily be overlooked, particularly negative prefixes that have a way of blending in with the words they modify. (For example: Because it is a liquid at room temperature, mercury is indistinguishable from other metals. If you read this sentence quickly, you may miss the "in" and mark the statement true.) Objective questions that contain two or more negatives can be even more troublesome. (For example: It is logical to assume that Thomas Edison's fame was due to his many practical inventions. causes no trouble — it could be mark "true" with no difficulty. However, you might have trouble with: It is illogical to assume that Thomas Edison's fame was not due to his many practical inventions — which is also true.) When you find negatives in objective questions,

circle them. Then disregard them for a moment, and try to gain the meaning of the question that remains. Finally, reread the sentence with the negatives included. Each negative you add reverses the meaning of the question. With two negatives, for example, the question's meaning should be the same as it was when the negatives were removed.

Watch for multiple concepts. Watch for multiple ideas or concepts within the same statement. All parts of a statement must be true or the entire statement is false.

Be alert for grammatical inconsistencies. On multiple-choice questions, a choice is almost always wrong if it and the stem do not make a grammatically correct sentence.

Be very cautious about changing your answer. Your first guess is more likely to be correct than are subsequent guesses, so be sure to have a sound reason for changing your answer.

On matching exercises, work with only one column at a time. Match each item in that column against all items in the second column until you find a proper match. Cross out those you're certain about so it will be easier to match those you're not sure about. Matching carelessly or guessing prematurely can sometimes lead to a chain reaction of mistakes. If you make an incorrect match, you will deprive another item of its rightful match. This can aggravate your error by increasing the chances of another bad connection. Avoid this potential pitfall by making your matches carefully and by pairing up the items you are sure of before you begin guessing on items you're uncertain about.

Problem Tests:
Problem tests usually consist of mathematical or scientific problems to be worked by using a formula or applying a rule, often in a step-by-step process.

Make notes. Write down hard-to-remember formulas, equations, rules, etc., as soon as the test begins but before you actually start working on the test problems.

Work problems one step at a time. Don't get frustrated and, above all, don't give up if you can't immediately work through to the answer of a problem. Often, completing one step of a problem will help you remember or figure out what the next step should be.

Do all you can. If a problem is difficult but you have a general idea of the process involved, do all you can to work the problem. Show all your work. Even if your answer is incorrect, you may get partial credit if you have used the right process. If you are completely unable to work a problem, don't waste time on it. Move quickly on to the next one and come back if time permits.

Be organized. Show all the steps in your work and clearly identify or label your answer so that your instructor can find it quickly.

Essay Tests:

Essay tests may ask you to list the causes, compare the outcomes, or illustrate terms in regard to given topics. In answering essay questions, stick to the point. An outline will help you to remain focused on the topic. Use the score points assigned to each question as a guide to the amount of information that your instructor expects.

Read all questions before beginning. Scan through all the questions quickly, jotting down beside each question any pertinent facts or ideas that occur to you. This will give you a good overview of the entire test and help ensure that your answers do not overlap each other. Decide what kind of answer each question requires before you begin writing. A different kind of answer is required by such action verbs as illustrate, list, define, compare, identify, and explain.

Answer the easiest questions first. Beginning with the easiest questions will help you feel more confident and will serve as a good warm-up for the more difficult questions. Don't spend too long on easy questions though. Questions that are easier than others sometimes are worth fewer points.

Concentrate on one question at a time. Thinking about another question as you are trying to write on one will confuse you.

Make an outline. To ensure good organization and prevent careless omissions, make a brief, logical outline for your answer before you start writing.

Get to the point. Avoid long-winded introductions. Your aim in answering most essay questions is to provide the largest amount of point-earning information in the time allowed. A brief, to-the-point thesis statement should open your answer. Then move right into the topic, stating each of your points in order. Develop each point fully, but don't pad your answer.

Include facts. When appropriate, include factual details, examples, and analogies to support your answers. Facts show your instructor that you know the material in depth. Examples and analogies show your instructor that you understand how the material is related to other topics.

Be neat. Take time to write legibly and make your corrections, if any, as neatly as possible. Most instructors react favorably to neatness so let this work for you. Use a separate paragraph for each main idea. This helps the instructor follow your reasoning. Leave space between your answers. You may need it for new ideas or additional details that occur later when you return to reread what you have written.

This material is summarized from Study Power published by Dr. William F. Brown in consultation with ACT.