

TEST TAKING STRATEGIES

Test taking strategies can encompass an enormous amount of information. This site will hopefully streamline the process and will be geared as to how the teacher can help a student. Some web sites will be provided should one want more detailed information.

Some of the anxiety associated with test-taking comes from a fear of the unknown. It is easy to become overwhelmed by the weight of what could be asked—there are infinite possibilities. Understanding the format and parameters of the test will help your students focus on their studies. What should they know about an exam before they first sit down to study?

1. What are the testing parameters?

- - What is the date and time of the exam?
 - Where is the exam? Is it in the regular classroom or in a larger testing location?
 - How long will they have to take the exam?
 - Can they bring a calculator/formula sheet/etc.?
 - Will it be open book/notes?

2. What will the format of the test be?

- - Will it be multiple choice, short answer, essay, problems.....
 - What will the breakdown of the test be? (All problems or 40% short answer/60% essay...)

3. What percentage of the final grade is this exam worth?

- - Do not dwell on this, but attempt to ease their fears.

4. Review with the student where the testing material will come from. Is the student expected to have mastered the material covered between certain dates or within certain chapters of the text? Most syllabi are arranged chronologically by class date. Have the students make a notation next to each class (or entry) containing material that will be covered on the upcoming exam.

- - Will information in handouts and other supplemental materials be covered on the exam? Relay to the student what is important.
- - Is there any overlap between material covered on this test and that covered on previous exams? Does success on this exam depend on mastery of concepts that have eluded you on prior tests? If so, then account for this in the study plan. Make notations on the syllabus to review that additional information.

- - Are you currently teaching material that will not be covered on the upcoming test, but will likely be on the next one? Sometimes instructors will defer the newest material (information taught the same week of an exam) to the next test. Be certain that the student understands where the material for this test ends on the syllabus.
- - Allow time for students to ask reasonable questions before the test. This may help with frustration.

5. Help the student realize the importance of a study plan. Regular review of material throughout the term is the single best way to prepare for an exam. Marathon study sessions and cramming are not nearly as effective, but they are unfortunately the last alternatives for students short on time. Whether they are planning two weeks in advance or the night before the exam, they can still create an effective study plan to improve their performance.

- - How much time do they have to invest in exam preparation and over how many days is that time spread? A student studying two hours each day for five days is in a different situation from a student studying ten hours the night before, although they are both investing the same amount of time. The second student will become fatigued, overloaded and stressed more easily, he or she will not have opportunities to consult in problem areas as they arise. Breaking the work down into manageable pieces and spreading it over several days is essential. Planning more than one week in advance is ideal, especially when they have more than one exam to juggle.
- - Assume that you have five days to prepare, and that your schedule is tight.

Your free time this week looks like this:

Sunday:	6 hours
Monday:	2 one-hour blocks
Tuesday:	2 two-hour blocks
Wednesday:	2 one-hour blocks
Thursday:	5 hours

* Make study sessions reasonable in length, working no longer than 2 hours without a break. If one plans to spend all 5 hours on Thursday, studying, one should plan to take a 30 minute break in the middle to recuperate. The mind needs time to assimilate and process the new information, and one will need a break to stay in good spirits.

6. Breakdown studies in one or two ways:

- - The student can study most critical material first. This works well if the concepts one is learning in class are not closely related.
- - One can study the material in the chronological sequence that one learned it. The work of each class is interrelated and continually builds on the knowledge of previous work, then it makes more sense to take a chronological approach. Begin studies with the material from the first class and move forward in chronological order, spending only small amounts of time in low priority areas and more time in higher priority areas. This review will give a stronger basis from which to master the more important material when one gets to it. If one chooses to study in chronological order, be careful to pace oneself so that one does not leave a critical block to do the night before the exam simply because it occurs last on the checklist.
- - The most important feature of both types of planning is to spend the most time on your highest priority work. A medium-amount of time on your second priority work, and the least time on your lowest priority work (usually by skimming it).
- - Schedule any supplemental meetings one might need, such as time with a TA, a tutor, your study group or a friend. Plan those meetings in advance, as well as the material one expects to cover during them. Establishing goals will keep one on track.
- - Over-Preparing. Inform the student that there is no way for them to anticipate every possible application of what they are learning. The technique of thinking flexibly is a skill they will develop with practice—not by studying to an extreme degree. Be reasonable when they plan their studies and remember that instructors are testing what they can be reasonably be expected to know— which is a finite and manageable amount of work.
- - Too Little Time. They will have to choose which things to study, and plan not to cover the rest. Only they will be able to judge which information is most critical to them, but remember this: Some studying is always better than no studying, so do not give up because it is not possible to learn everything.
 - Incremental progress is still progress, so cover what they can well. Quality, not quantity, is the key.

7. Here are some techniques to suggest to the student to keep their studying on track:

- - Choose a good location to study. This place should be clean, quiet, well-lit, a cool temperature and away from all distractions, such as friends or the television. Use this location for studying only, to help you cultivate a studious frame of mind while you are there. Always be certain to take everything with you that you will need to work, including books, lecture notes, past assignments, pens and pencils.
- - Bring your checklist and stay on task. If you become stuck on a concept or problem, make a notation on your checklist to speak with the teacher and move along. You might go over your allotted time and need to schedule more time for later. This is fine; your study plan is a guideline, not an absolute. Catch up as soon as possible, and continue as planned.
- - Practice, practice, practice. Rework past assignment problems and sample problems from the text, noting how and why techniques are implemented. If you cannot explain the reasoning behind a mathematical process, then you likely do not understand it fully.
 - Note similarities and differences among problems. This helps to cultivate the skill of thinking flexibly. How and why does a solution work? How else could a problem be solved? How does the knowledge you are acquiring relate with other concepts?
- - Keep a list of formulae and major concepts. As you study, jot down items that you need to memorize and carry the list with you throughout the day. Review this material when you are caught standing in line or with time to spare between classes.
- - Selectively review your texts. Do not re-read your textbook; you have already done it once and to do again would overload you. Review sections you have highlighted, any notes you made in the margins, formulae, definitions and chapter summaries. You should be refreshing your memory and clarifying information, not assimilating it in extreme detail.

8. A Word about Test Anxiety. Preparing for and taking exams can be stressful. Here are a few things to have your students keep in mind when anxiety starts to rise:

- Eat and sleep well. These are essential, not just on test day, but in general. Health and happiness go hand in hand.
- How do you relax? Have you ever watched television, intending to unwind, and found yourself under incredible internal pressure to return to your work? Activities that help

you to avoid stress are generally not as useful as those which help you to deal with it directly. Progressive relaxation, meditation, deep breathing exercises, yoga and playing sports are all excellent ways to unwind, as they help to address the physical symptoms of your stress.

- That little voice inside your head. Imagine if someone came into your room while you were studying and said “I don’t know why you are bothering to do this. You are so far behind that you will never catch up. It’s utterly hopeless”. You would never tolerate this treatment from another person, and yet when that little voice inside your head begins berating you, it has the sound of authority. Recognize these thoughts for what they are: feelings of fear and self-doubt. Yes, you have a lot of work to do, but you most certainly can do it..

9. The Night Before the Test.

- Study a reasonable amount.
- Assemble everything that you will need for the exam.
- Get a good night’s sleep.

10. Test Day

- Have breakfast (even if it is only a bite on the run) and avoid caffeine.
- Come to class early with the materials you will need.
- Don’t let the nervousness of classmates infect you!

11. Taking the Exam: General Points for All Tests

- Listen to the instructor for any last minute details.
- Write your name on the exam.
- Read the instructions on the test carefully.
- Skim through the exam once to get a sense of how much time to spend on each question or problem.
- After looking through the entire test to get a “lay of the land”, begin with the easier questions first.
- Do not spend a long time on questions worth only a little. Be succinct and move along.
- Always show your work and never erase. Partial credit is your friend!
- Keep track of the time and check your work.
- Regard a lapse of memory as perfectly normal; do not let it throw you into a panic. If you block on answering one question, leave it for awhile and return to it later.
- Ask your instructor for help in interpreting a test question that is unclear or ambiguous to you. He/she will probably want to clear up the misunderstanding for everybody if the question really is misleading or confusing.
- Be careful not to give any impression of cheating.
- Do not be disturbed about other students finishing before you do. Take your time, do not panic, and you will do much better on the test.

12. Different Types of Tests. Different test questions require different approaches. Here are some techniques to share with your students:

True/False

- The statement must be 100% true in order to be marked “true”, not 50% true or even 99%. This could be the difference of just one word, so read carefully.
- Because of this, false answers tend to be extreme in their wording and true answers moderate.
 - Usually false key words: no, never, none, always, every, entirely, only
 - Usually true key words: sometimes, often, frequently, ordinarily, generally
- When in doubt, guess “true”. You have a 50% chance of being right, and since the purpose of the exam is to impart accurate information, tests tend to be weighted slightly toward true answers.

Multiple Choice

- Read the directions carefully, as you might be asked to select the one incorrect option or to choose more than one answer.
- As with true/false questions, be sensitive to the wording of the question and answers. Is the wording extreme or moderate?
- Eliminate any answers which are obviously wrong first.
- Choose the best answer, which is not necessarily the familiar answer. Try not to second guess yourself.
- If you are stuck, select “all of the above”, if that is an option. As with true/false questions, the purpose of the exam is to teach as well as test, so “all of the above” is correct slightly more often than you might expect.

Short Answer

- Use your initial survey of the test to determine how much time to spend on each response. Also consider how much space is provided and how many points the question is worth.
- Short answer responses require no introduction and should be brief and to the point.
- Do not fall into the trap of elaborating on a short answer question because you feel confident of your response. Answer succinctly and continue onward.

Essays

- Underline or circle the important words in the essay question. Be careful to note when more than one question is asked and which particular points must be addressed.
- Consider what the question is asking exactly. Are you asked to analyze, interpret or describe in your reply? Although these words might be used interchangeably in conversation, as part of an essay response they have very specific meanings. Be certain that your response is framed appropriately.

- Think before you write. Take a moment to construct a brief outline of your response. This will save you time in the long run and help you to keep your essay on task.
- If the essay asks you to answer multiple questions, number them on the sheet and be certain to address each systematically. Weigh your responses evenly unless the question specifically requests otherwise. If you answer one half of the essay in three pages and the other half in one paragraph, you might only receive 60% credit for the entire essay.
- Get to the point. Avoid wordy, rambling sentences by using brief transition words: for example, accordingly, similarly, finally.
- Avoid personal opinions. Your answers should be factual and cite supporting evidence unless otherwise requested.
- If you are running out of time and not done so already, outline the remaining points you wish to make in your essay. You might get partial credit for these concepts even if they are not presented in essay form.
- Check your spelling and grammar when you are done.
- As you proofread your essay, ask yourself whether you have answered the question(s)? If you have not, what points might you briefly insert or elaborate upon to bring the essay into focus?

Open Book Exams

- Open book exams are sometimes given when a student needs to refer to charts or other materials in the text. You must prepare for an open book exam as thoroughly as you would for a closed book exam. You won't have time to