

Test Taking Strategies

Tests measure how you are doing in a class. Doing well on tests requires test-taking skills, a positive attitude, strategic thinking and planning, and a solid grasp of the material. This handout contains tips that apply to all types of tests.

Preparing for Tests

1. 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 the 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 and intellectual skills you will be asked to use. Examples of these skills include:
 - Remembering specific facts, details, terms, and definitions.
 - Comparing, contrasting, or interpreting meanings.
 - Applying principles and theories to solve problems.
 - Predicting possible outcomes given a set of variables.
 - Evaluating the usefulness of certain ideas, concepts, or methods for a given situation.
2. Overview all the work to be done and schedule time to do it. Make a list of all tasks you must complete to prepare for the test, and prioritize these tasks.
3. Avoid the “escape syndrome.” If you find yourself fretting or talking about your work rather than studying, relax for a few minutes. Rethink and reappraise what you are doing, then do it!
4. When faced with unread material keep in mind your study plan, how much time you have, and what you need to get out of the reading. Divide the material into parts, looking for the organizational scheme, and decide what can be omitted, what can be skimmed, and what needs to be read. Set time limits for reading each part and stick to them, using the following techniques:
 - Skim all of the 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.
 - Emphasize key sentences, and concentrate on understanding the ideas. Ask yourself the questions who, what, where, when and how.
 - Recite the material to yourself immediately (self-testing at the end of each part can enhance recall even without later review).

5. Review actively. Review and summarize the information from your notes, reading and study guides. Integrate notes, text, and other information onto summary sheets by diagramming, charting, outlining, categorizing, or simply writing summaries. Try to create a summary sheet for each study session, or for each main idea, or for each concept. Make study sheets (outlines, lists, note cards).
6. Practice doing what you will be doing on the test. Make up your own test. Answer any review questions. Answer unassigned problems and questions in the text or anticipate test questions by asking, "If I were making up this test I would probably ask..." and then answer your question. Remember that the best way to prepare for any test is to practice doing what you will have to do on the test.
7. Study with other well-prepared students and attend any review sessions. Such sessions are to clarify material; don't expect them to repeat lectures or give additional information.
8. Study what you DO NOT know, not what you know.

Taking Tests

1. Be prepared emotionally and physically as well as intellectually. Get enough rest the night before the test; prepare your brain for optimum functioning by keeping your physical resources well maintained. Stop studying an hour or so before the test and relax.
2. Stay away from others right before the test, anxiety is highly contagious. Get into a "fighting" attitude, emotionally ready to do your best.
3. Arrive early enough to arrange your working conditions and establish a calm, alert mode. Do not talk to others.
4. When you receive your test use the back to jot down all the information you might forget, but first, ask whether you can write on the test form.
5. Preview the whole test before trying to answer any questions. Ask the instructor to clarify any ambiguities. Read the directions carefully.
6. Plan your time. Allow the most time for the questions, which offer the most points, and leave time at the end to review.
7. Read the questions first, but don't answer them. Put a * by the questions you know and a ? next to the ones you don't know. Then go back and begin answering the questions, starting with the ones you know first. This will build your confidence and trigger recall of other information.
8. Cycle through again to work on the harder items. Choose the best answer. Save your guessing for last. Never leave an unanswered question; you may get partial credit for a partial answer.

9. Don't panic if you see a question you did not anticipate. Use everything you know to analyze the question and create a logical answer.
10. Read the question as is. Look for, circle, or underline key words. Show all your work. Use lists when appropriate and outline essays before writing. Choose the best answer.

Analyze Returned Tests

1. If you receive your test back to keep, rework your errors to find out why the correct answer was correct. If you don't receive your test back, visit your instructor's office to take a look at your answers and the questions you missed. Analyzing returned tests will help you when planning for future tests.
2. Look for the origin of each question – text, notes, lab, supplementary reading, etc. This will help you know what to study for the next test.
3. Identify the reason you missed questions. Did you fail to read it correctly? Did you fail to prepare for it? Was the test more difficult than you prepared for? Did you run out of time?
4. 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 text or did the testmaker expect you to make sophisticated transformations and analyses?
5. Did you have problems with anxiety or blocking during the test? This happens to 20% of college students and there is assistance available from your TRIO Student Support Services Counselor.

Answering Specific Types of Questions

True-False Questions

1. Be sure that every part of the question is correct. For the question to be true, every detail within must also be true.
2. Check to see how qualifiers are used. Questions containing words like always, never, and only are usually false. Questions using less definite terms like often and frequently are usually true.
3. Be alert for negatives and negative prefixes (not, cannot, un, in, non). Negatives make the meaning of a statement more complicated. Try restating the idea in positive terms, then put the negatives back in and decide if any part of the statement is false.

4. When forced with guessing, remember that there are usually more true answers than false.

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. Read the question carefully; with careful reading you will find that the right answer is frequently apparent.
2. Question choices that use absolute words such as always, never, and only. These choices are often incorrect. Read carefully for terms like not, except, and but.
3. If an answer does not come to you quickly, put a ? and move on to another; a later test item may jolt your memory.
4. As you work through your options, cross out the ones that seem wrong. Eliminate as many choices as you can so as to increase the odds in your favor. Often the process of elimination is the only way to answer a question.
5. Try putting the question into true-false terms; make a complete statement of the stem of each option.
6. When all else fails, guess. When guessing, remember that "All of the above" is more often correct than wrong.

Matching Questions

1. Before answering the matching-question part of the exam, review all of the terms and descriptions.
2. Match up those terms you are sure of first. Cross out items as they are eliminated.
3. The relationship is the crucial factor in a set of matching items. Usually the relationship is common to all included items (terms in one column, definitions in the other).

Essay Questions

1. Before you write, read all of the questions and underline key words. Develop an outline.
2. While you write, state your thesis, follow your outline, provide specific examples, get to the point quickly.
3. Write neatly. Draw conclusions and summarize.
4. Proofread your answers.