

Test & Exam Preparation

A Student Academic Learning Services Workshop



Test & Exam Preparation

Test Preparation Strategies



Time Management

One of the most important things you can do to prepare for tests and exams is to practice time management strategies. Make sure that you:

- Use an agenda to keep track of when your tests and exams are
- Create a weekly study schedule so you know when you have time to study
- Study during the time of day when you are most alert (there is no point to studying when you are exhausted). Also, begin your study session with the most difficult (or dry) material
- Begin reviewing early to give yourself time to get comfortable with the information and to ask questions if you don't understand the material



Study Strategies

There are many study strategies you can learn and practice that will increase your understanding and help you retain (remember) the class material.

- Attend class regularly
 - Connect what you read in the text with what you hear in lecture
 - Provides an opportunity to ask questions regarding homework and readings
 - Discuss your learning and questions with your peers
- Keep up with your weekly reading and homework assignments
 - The textbook will describe the information in a manner different from the lecture. By reading the textbook and making personal study notes you increase your understanding and retention of the material
- Review your notes and homework assignments regularly (daily)
 - Repetition is one of the BEST ways to create long-term memories. It takes anywhere between four and seven repetitions of a thought to encode it in long-term memory (depending on the person and the material)
 - Redo problems that were difficult during the term
 - Create sample questions from your study notes
 - Recite aloud while reviewing to slow down your thinking; the longer you hold a thought the more likely it will stay in memory



Study Strategies Continued...

- Break your study time into “chunks”
 - You need to give your brain opportunities to process new information
 - After 30-40 minutes of reading, pause and take some time (5-10 min.) to think about what you have just learned
 - Ask yourself what the important ideas were, what were the details, what examples were given, how does this new idea connect to other ideas you’ve learnt previously...
 - After processing the new information move on to the next “chunk”
 - You also need to give your brain a chance to rest; after 2-3 hours of work take a 20-30 minute break to refresh yourself
 - It is more efficient to study in two three-hour chunks than to study six hours continuously
 - Consider alternating subjects between large chunks (2-3 hours) of study to help maintain motivation and interest
- Location, location, location...
 - Study in a place that resembles, as much as possible, the location where you will take the test or exam
 - Ensure that your study space is quiet, free of distractions (TVs, roommates, etc.), and has good lighting
 - Choose a place that can be associated with STUDYING, not any other activity
- Create study checklists
 - Identify and list, using your course outlines and lecture notes, the material you will be tested on
 - The list will help you organize and “chunk” your studying time
- Summary notes, tables, and flashcards
 - Make summary notes from your textbook readings using effective note taking strategies. Be sure to summarize and reorganize the content in ways that are meaningful to you. Tables, charts, and mind maps are great ways to display, compare, and contrast large amounts of information. Record your notes on tape and listen to them, especially if you are an auditory learner.
 - Flashcards / Cue cards are a great way of creating portable, quick study tools. Quiz yourself on definitions, formulas, or lists that you must memorize.



Yet More Study Strategies...

- More bang for your buck... be an active learner
 - Preview the content of your lectures by looking at the PowerPoint (if available) and textbook BEFORE class
 - Review the notes immediately after the lecture to identify content that you don't understand. Be sure to follow up on your questions
- Group work
 - We learn as much (or more) from discussing the content with peers as we do from the lecture. Discuss the content of the lecture with classmates between classes.
 - Choose study partners who will help you focus
 - Small groups (2-5 persons) work well for review but larger groups tend to lose focus quickly

Test Taking Strategies



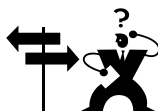
Arrive on Time

Arriving on time will help to avoid the "brain pickers," other students who ask you a question right before the test to which you may or may not know the answer. This can create unwanted anxiety.



Do a Memory Dump

As soon as you can, write down any information that you can remember about the subject. This will help you avoid forgetting something once you feel some anxiety. Once you are done your initial memory dump, you may wish to quickly review it and do a second 'memory dump' of anything else that you have remembered.



Read Directions Carefully

By reading the directions carefully you will ensure that you are doing what you are supposed to do, and not wasting valuable time.



Budget Time Wisely

Quickly review the test before you begin to decide how much time you will spend on each part of the test depending on its value. Allow enough time for sections that may take more time or are worth more in the final grade



Do the Easiest Questions First

Get yourself on a roll right away by answering the questions you know. This will increase your confidence! Next go after the question worth the most marks.



Practice Relaxation

Relaxation techniques can be useful during a test if you find that anxiety is interfering with your performance. Some anxiety is good because it helps us perform better but at some point the anxiety can reduce performance. See the Stress and Anxiety section of this handout for relaxation strategies.

Test Taking Strategies: Some Specifics

Different test questions require different approaches. Here are some techniques to keep in mind.

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.

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 in as few words and continue onward.

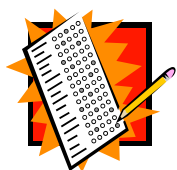
Essays

- 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 re-read and look for formulas during the test.
- Number and index your textbook so that the parts of it that you need to reference are easy to find.

Multiple Choice Questions



Format

Directions: often these are at the beginning of the multiple choice section of the test.

1. *Stem:* this is the question or statement that you must respond to.

Options: these are the choices you must select from as the correct response to the stem

A)
B)
etc.

Strategies

- Read the directions carefully
 - Know if each question has more than one correct option
 - Know if you are penalized for guessing
- Cover the options before reading the stem and try to think of the answer
- Examine the options and select the one that most resembles your answer (if your answer isn't there, mark the question for follow-up then move to the next question)
- Answer the easy questions first
- Once all the easy ones are out of the way think critically and use strategies to answer the more difficult questions
- Always mark your response on both the question sheet and the Scantron



Thinking Critically (and improving the odds)

- Rephrase the stem and options in your own words
- Read the stem with each option
- Eliminate options you know are incorrect
- Consider the "...above" options
 - Examine the options to see if all of them (or none of them) match the stem. If *even one* does not (or does) match the stem then "all of the above" (or "none of the above") cannot be the correct response.
 - Note: just because an option is true information does not mean it is a correct response. The information in the option must match the statement or question posed in the stem
- Examine negative language
 - If negative terms such as "none" or "neither" occur in the stem then the correct response must be a fact or absolute statement
 - Note: other options might be true information, but not the correct response
- Examine absolute language (superlatives)
 - If the stem uses superlatives (e.g. "always" or "never") then the correct option must be an undisputed fact.
 - Options that contain superlatives *tend* to be false information
- Examine qualifying language
 - Options that contain qualifying words (e.g. "usually", "often", or "sometimes") *tend* to indicate true information
- When two options have the same basic meaning you can eliminate both
- If two options have opposite meanings, examine them closely... one of them is likely the correct one
- If the options are number ranges, consider the middle range
- Always guess if there is no penalty for a wrong answer, but don't guess if there is
- Look for hints in other questions and sections of the test
- YES... change your answers if you have reason to do so

Test and Exam Terminology

Knowing exactly how to answer the question will save you a lot of time and help guide your response. Be familiar with the following terms so you don't waste precious time writing information that is not requested by the question.

Compare:

Examine qualities, or characteristics, to discover resemblances. "Compare" is usually stated as "compare with": you are to emphasize similarities, although differences may be mentioned.

Contrast:

Stress dissimilarities, differences, or unlikeness of things, qualities, events, or problems.

Criticize:

Express your judgment or correctness or merit. Discuss the limitations and good points or contributions of the plan or work in question.

Define:

Definitions call for concise, clear, authoritative meanings. Details are not required but limitations of the definition should be briefly cited. You must keep in mind the class to which a thing belongs and whatever differentiates the particular object from all others in the class.

Describe:

In a descriptive answer you should recount, characterize, sketch or relate in narrative form.

Diagram:

For questions that specify a diagram, you should present a drawing, chart, plan, or graphic representation in your answer. Generally you are expected to label the diagram and in some cases add a brief explanation or description.

Discuss:

The term discuss, which appears often in essay questions, directs you to examine, analyze carefully, and present considerations pro and con regarding the problems or items involved. This type of question calls for a complete and entailed answer.

Enumerate:

The word enumerate specifies a list or outline form of reply. In such questions you should recount, one by one, in concise form, the points required.

Evaluate:

In an evaluation question you are expected to present a careful appraisal of the problem stressing both advantages and limitations. Evaluation implies authoritative and, to a lesser degree, personal appraisal of both contributions and limitations.

Explain:

In explanatory answers it is imperative that you clarify and interpret the material you present. In such an answer it is best to state the "how or why," reconcile any differences in opinion or experimental results, and, where possible, state causes. The aim is to make plain the conditions which give rise to whatever you are examining.

Illustrate:

A question which asks you to illustrate usually requires you to explain or clarify your answer to the problem by presenting a figure, picture, diagram, or concrete example.

Interpret:

An interpretation question is similar to one requiring explanation. You are expected to translate, exemplify, solve, or comment upon the subject and usually to give your judgment or reaction to the problem.

Justify:

When you are instructed to justify your answer you must prove or show grounds for decisions. In such an answer, evidence should be presented in convincing form.

List:

Listing is similar to enumeration. You are expected in such questions to present an itemized series or tabulation. Such answers should always be given in concise form.

Outline:

An outline answer is an organized description. You should give main points and essential supplementary materials, omitting minor details, and present the information in a systematic arrangement or classification.

Prove:

A question which requires proof is one which demands confirmation or verification. In such discussions you should establish something with certainty by evaluating and citing experimental evidence or by logical reasoning.

Relate:

In a question which asks you to show the relationship or to relate, your answer should emphasize connections and associations in descriptive form.

Review:

A review specifies a critical examination. You should analyze and comment briefly in organized sequence upon the major points of the problem.

State:

In questions which direct you to specify, give, state, or present, you are called upon to express the high points in brief, clear narrative form. Details, and usually illustrations or examples, may be omitted.

Summarize:

When you are asked to summarize or present a summarization, you should give in condensed form the main points or facts. All details, illustrations and elaboration are to be omitted.

Trace:

When a question asks you to trace a course of events, you are to give a description of progress, historical sequence, or development from the point of origin. Such narratives may call for probing or for deduction.

Modified and adapted from: Communication Skills Development Center, Division of Student Affairs, University of South Carolina as found at <http://www.history.ohio-state.edu/essayexm.htm> January 2002

Stress & Anxiety

Stress and anxiety are very normal parts of student life, especially during tests and exams. Fortunately there are many things you can do to help you cope with the pressure.



Before the test

- Practice good time management
 - Create and follow a study schedule
 - Build “de-stress” time into your study schedule
 - Plan rewards
- Be positive
 - See the test or exam as the application of your studies; another step in the process. Not as a threatening experience.
- Anxiety is contagious
 - Stay away from people who are highly anxious before exams; their nervousness will increase your own.
- See a counselor
 - If you find yourself overwhelmed by anxiety during tests and exams you may want to seek strategies and advice from a counselor. Appointments can be made at the Campus Health Centre.

During the test

- Watch what you eat and drink before tests and exams
 - Avoid stimulants; typically they will heighten your anxiety and impair your ability to focus. Also, the effect may wear off during the exam and you will experience a “crash”
- Be sure to read the directions carefully at the beginning of the test or exam
 - This provides you a moment to acclimatize to the test environment
- Budget your time
 - Figure out how much each section of the test or exam is worth and then decide how much time to spend on each section (e.g. divide the total time available by the total number of marks)



During the test

- Practice relaxation techniques
 - *Focus on your breathing.* In a state of anxiety your body is concerned with ensuring it has enough oxygen to supply your muscles should you need to fight or run away. You find yourself taking rapid and deep breaths. Unfortunately, this condition completely sabotages your ability to reason or recall information. By focusing on your breath, becoming aware of and feeling the air move in and out of your nose and mouth, you can consciously slow the pace and depth of your breathing. This conscious change of breath pattern feeds back to the brain and stops the production of anxiety producing chemicals. The chemicals are lasting so it will take a few minutes of calm breathing for the desired effect to be felt (but don't worry... you will).
 - *Muscle relaxation.* When we are in an anxious state we find our shoulders up around our ears and our head bent forward. This is a natural response to stress meant to protect your head and neck from attack. Unfortunately, it's also feeding our anxiety. To help counteract this tension try the following exercise: starting at your toes, start to contract and hold all the muscles in your feet, while holding the tension, start working your way up your body, tensing and holding each and every muscle you can, once you've reached the top of your head, hold the tension for at least fifteen seconds, then release and relax all of your muscles at once. The wave of relaxation is often a great way to help you refocus.
 - *Happy Thoughts™* can be one of your best assets when feeling the pressure during a test. Before writing a test or exam prepare a particularly happy or joyous memory. Take the time to really savor the details of that moment in your life. When you "hit the wall" during the test, simply take a moment to recall your happy thought. In response to this memory your brain will signal the release of "happy chemicals" that help counteract the anxiety producing chemicals.