

Test Taking Strategies: General Tips

HCTC Student Success Tools

Tests measure how you are doing in a course. Usually test scores are the key determinants of your course grade. Doing well on tests requires test-taking skills, a purposeful positive attitude, strategic thinking and planning, and, naturally, a solid grasp of the course content. This handout contains tips that apply to all types of tests; additional tips are available for problem solving tests, objective tests, and essay 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 a 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, and otherwise interpreting meaning in the information studies.
- ◆ Applying principles and theories to solve problems (that may not have been covered explicitly in the course.)
- ◆ 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.** On the basis of your familiarity with the test, make a list of all the tasks you must complete to prepare for it. Assign priorities to your study tasks according to the topics you expect to be most important on the test. In scheduling your test preparation, try to stick to your own routines. There are handouts on time management at the Learning Skills Center.

3. **Avoid the "escape syndrome."** If you find yourself fretting or talking about your work rather than studying, relax for a few minutes and rethink what you are doing, reappraise your priorities and if necessary rethink your study plan to address your worries and then start working!

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. The following techniques might help you get through your reading:

- ◆ 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.** Integrate notes, text, and other information onto summary sheets by diagramming, charting, outlining, categorizing in tables, or simply writing summaries. Try to create a summary sheet for each study session, or for each main idea, or for each concept. Use all your senses as well as your sense of humor when writing your summary sheets to make them meaningful.

6. **Practice doing what you will be doing on the test.** 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, 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 the material; don't expect them to repeat lectures or give additional information.

Taking Tests:

1. **Be prepared emotionally and physically as well as intellectually.** Get into a "fighting" attitude, emotionally ready to do your best. Stay away from others right before the test, anxiety is highly contagious. Focus on what you know rather than what you do not know; reinforce your strengths and arrest your weaknesses. Get enough rest the night before the test, eat well balanced meals and exercise regularly, prepare your brain for optimum functioning by keeping your physical resources well maintained. Avoid fasts; do not take any stimulants you are not used to, and if you are used to them (i.e., coffee or soft drinks), keep within moderate amounts.

2. **Arrive at the test room early** enough to arrange your working conditions and establish a calm, alert mode. Select a seat where the lighting is best (frequently in the front of the room) and where your view of other students will be minimal.

3. **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.

4. **Preview the whole test before trying to answer any questions.** Make sure your copy has no missing or duplicate pages. Ask the instructor or proctor to clarify any ambiguities. **Read the directions carefully.**

5. **Plan your time.** Allow the most time for the questions which offer the most points, and leave time at the end to review.

6. **Start with the easy questions** to build confidence and gain time for harder questions. Work the entire test, and put down an answer for each question even if you must guess (unless there is a "correction for guessing").

7. **Do not panic** if you see a question you did not anticipate. Use everything you know to analyze the question and create a logical answer. Go for partial credit when you know you cannot get all the points: If you have studied, you are bound to know something.

8. Read the question as is. **Avoid overanalyzing or oversimplifying**, or you will end up answering a question that exists only in your mind. Answer the question the test maker intended: interpret the test within the scope of the course.

Analyzing Returned Tests:

1. If you receive your test back to keep, **rework your errors** to find out why the correct answer was correct.
2. If you do not receive your test back, **visit your instructor's office** to take a look at your answer sheet and the questions you missed.
3. **Look for the origin of each question**--text, notes, labs, supplementary reading, etc.
4. **Identify the reason you missed questions**. Did you fail to read it correctly? Did you fail to prepare for it? Was the test at a more difficult level than you prepared for? Did you run out of time?
5. **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 test maker expect you to make sophisticated transformations and analyses?
6. Did you have any problems with **anxiety or blocking** during the test?