

Study Tips and Test Taking Strategies

You've studied hard, you're confident and relaxed, and the test is about to begin. Ideally, by the time you turn your test paper over to start writing, you've done all the prep work necessary to virtually guarantee yourself a good grade.

While knowing your material inside and out is the best way to get an A+, there are some test taking strategies that can help you out while you're writing. While they are no substitute for inadequate preparation, they can help you avoid wasting time or making silly mistakes that can cost you points. Just a few specific subjects that are covered in this part of the site are:

- ✓ The importance of understanding and following instructions
- ✓ Questions you should answer first and ones you should come back to
- ✓ The importance of examining the values of questions
- ✓ How to budget your time wisely
- ✓ Why it's usually a good idea to answer all questions, even ones you aren't sure about

The next time you write a test, try to implement some of the tips outlined in this section. A good approach to test taking and comprehensive preparation is an unbeatable combination if you're hoping to get a fantastic grade.

Read the Entire Test

Before you begin answering those true or false and short answer questions, take a few minutes to read over the entire test. A quick five-minute skim of a test or exam can help you:

- ✓ **Budget your time:** As you look through the test, take note of the number of questions it contains and the point value of questions. Then, develop a plan. Figure out roughly how much time you have to spend on each question or section, making sure to devote more time to questions with higher point values.
- ✓ **Write down a few key points:** An initial read through is a perfect opportunity to write down some key points for short answer and essay questions. Keep them very brief. A list of three or four keywords should be enough to help you organize your answers when you come back to complete these questions.
- ✓ **Choose an easy question to start with:** When you find a question that you know you can answer, mark it in some way so you can answer this question first. This is a good way to start the exam because it can help relieve feelings of anxiety.
- ✓ **Boost your confidence:** As long as you prepared thoroughly for the test, a quick read through should help relieve those pre-test jitters and increase your confidence in your ability to do well. Hopefully, you'll find that you know the answers to most of the questions on the exam, which will allow you to begin writing on a positive note.

Fill in Essential Data Before you Begin

Many teachers and professors teach multiple subjects and numerous course sections. Since they might have hundreds of tests and exams in their possession at a single time, they often request some identifying information that will help them keep tests organized and ensure they are returned to the correct student. Always fill in this information before you begin reading the test questions. Some things you might be asked to provide include:

- ✓ **Your name:** Whatever you do, don't make the serious mistake of forgetting to write your name on the test paper. To be safe, write your name on every sheet of paper you will be submitting in case your test booklet or answer sheets happen to get separated.
- ✓ **Your student number:** In larger universities, many professors use student numbers to identify students and record their grades. Look to see whether the professor has requested a student number, and write this on every page as well.
- ✓ **The date:** This isn't as important as the first two, but be sure to fill it in if you are asked to do so.
- ✓ **The course name:** Instructors that teach several courses may ask you to indicate the name of the course you are enrolled in on your test paper to make keeping everything straight easier for them.
- ✓ **The course section:** Teachers and professors alike will often have several sections of the same course. They might ask you to record your course section so they can keep batches of tests separate and return them to the correct group of students.

Follow all Instructions

Even if you're thoroughly prepared for a test, your mark can be adversely affected if you don't closely read and follow all instructions. Before you begin any part of a test, always check to see whether there are any directions so you can be sure to follow them exactly. Some things to check for include:

- ✓ **Where answers to questions should be written:** Your teacher or professor may indicate where you should write your answers in the test instructions. For tests that consist mainly of essay and short answer questions, you may be given sheets of lined paper and asked to write your answers on them. If there are sections of multiple choice or true and false questions on the test, you may have to shade in your answers on a separate sheet to make correcting the test easier for the teacher. Often, answers will simply be written directly on the test paper or booklet.
- ✓ **Whether you need to pass in scrap paper and/or rough drafts:** If you're asked to write an essay or complete calculations on a test, the teacher may request that you submit all of your rough work. It probably won't be graded directly, but the teacher might review it to get an idea of your writing or problem-solving method, and he or she may even take your process into consideration when assigning a grade.
- ✓ **Whether word counts or lengths for essay questions and short answers are indicated:** Sometimes, teachers and professors will offer a suggested length for essay and short answer questions. This is very valuable, since it will ensure you provide adequate detail about the topic without going overboard. The instructions might tell you roughly how many sentences, paragraphs, words, or pages your answer should be.
- ✓ **Whether you have a choice about which questions to answer:** To give all students a chance to do well, some teachers and professors offer choice on their tests. Always read instructions to determine whether this is the case. Mistakenly trying to answer every question when you only had to answer some will almost guarantee that you will run out of time, and it's also likely your grade will be much lower than you might have hoped.

Look at the Values of Questions

Almost every instructor will indicate how many points each question on a test or exam is worth. As you are reading through the entire test, pay close attention to the value of each question. This will help you use your time wisely during the test.

Obviously, you should plan to devote more time to questions that have a higher point value and less time to questions that are worth fewer points. The value of short answer and essay questions can help you decide how long your answers to these questions should be. Your response to a short answer question worth 10 points, for instance, should obviously contain substantially more detail than one that is only worth 5 points.

Examining the values of questions can also help you decide on the order in which you should answer them. Although completing a question you are sure of first is a good way to boost your confidence, you should focus next on questions that are worth the most. This will ensure that if you do run out of time, it will be questions with low point values that are left unanswered instead of questions worth a substantial portion of your final test grade.

Come Back to Questions you Aren't Sure About

Inevitably, there will be one or more questions on a test that you aren't 100% sure about. When you encounter these types of questions, the worst thing you can do is spend 20 or 30 minutes trying to come up with an answer. This will reduce the time you have available to spend on questions you *can* answer, can cause panic to set in, and will likely lower your grade overall.

The best thing to do when you encounter problematic questions is to simply move on and come back to them later if you have time left over at the end. Circle the question or mark it in some other way so you'll be able to find it again quickly, and move on to the other questions.

Bypassing questions you aren't sure about is a smart test taking strategy for a couple of reasons. First, as you answer other questions, you will gain confidence and begin to feel more relaxed. In some cases, this will be enough to allow you to recall the information needed to answer the problematic questions. Another reason why this is a good strategy is that the same concepts are often addressed in more than one test question. Completing other questions may give you the information you need to answer the ones that were giving you trouble.

Ask for Help if you are Unsure About Something

Although your instructor will probably try to make test instructions and questions as clear as possible, there may still be some portions that are confusing. If you aren't sure exactly what a question is asking, don't just make a guess and hope you are right. Instead, ask the instructor for clarification. There will probably be rules in place regarding how you should request assistance. If you are in your regular classroom, you may simply be permitted to approach the teacher's desk. In larger spaces like auditoriums, though, you may have to raise your hand and wait for assistance.

Remember, most professors and teachers will only be willing to explain questions and instructions. They won't be able to spell out what points you should put in your essay or indicate whether the response you provided to a particular question is correct. It's best not to put your instructors in an awkward situation by asking such questions. However, during the explanation, the instructor might give one or more clues that can help you when you're formulating your answer. Listen closely to the explanation in case the instructor mentions topics that were covered in class, lecture dates, formulas, examples, or anything else that may help you construct a strong response.

Use your Time Wisely

Tests and exams assess not only your subject matter knowledge, but also your ability to use allotted time wisely. The following dos and don'ts can help you make the most of your time in the exam room.

Do...

- ✓ **Focus on higher point questions:** Spend the most time on the sections that will provide the biggest boost to your final grade.
- ✓ **Move on when you've used up your allotted time for a question or section:** This can be hard to do, especially if you're a perfectionist or someone who likes to provide as much detail as possible in test responses. However, you must force yourself to move on when the time you budgeted for a question is up. Otherwise, you may find at the end that a large number of questions are still unanswered, which is not good news if you're hoping for a fantastic grade.

Don't...

- ✓ **Allow yourself to get stuck on a question:** You encounter a question you have no idea how to answer. Instead of moving on, you sit there for 20 or 30 minutes agonizing over it. This is a mistake most students make at some point, and it can be a costly one. Setting a time limit for questions and sticking to it can help you avoid this problem.
- ✓ **Spend too much time on the little things:** When you're writing a test, focus on the big picture. Your main goal is to answer all the questions the best way you know how. Don't spend excessive amounts of time proofreading your work or agonizing over word choice. These are tasks that are best completed at the end if you have time left over.
- ✓ **Get too bogged down in planning:** While you should take a few minutes at the beginning of the test to figure out roughly how much time to spend on each question, don't spend too much time on this task. Five minutes or so should be enough. The last thing you want to do is waste valuable time you could be using to actually answer the test questions.

Blanking

It's every student's worst nightmare: they get into the exam room and discover they've forgotten absolutely everything. As they read through the questions, they realize they cannot answer a single one. This dreaded phenomenon is known as blanking, and it's something many students worry will happen to them.

The truth is that blanking or forgetting everything the minute you begin looking over a test isn't that common. If you've ever had a test and found you couldn't answer the majority of the questions, it's important to be honest with yourself about how well you prepared. If you just read the information over quickly the night before the test, it's not at all surprising that you couldn't recall very much of it on test day. Students often say "I blanked" instead of the more accurate "I wasn't prepared."

Another common cause of blanking is test anxiety, but it's often only temporary. Usually, this problem can be solved by taking a few deep breaths and answering a few easy questions to boost confidence. Most students will find that the information will come back to them. If test anxiety is severe, however, and you couldn't remember the test material despite regular study, you may need some help. Make an appointment with a counselor at your school to see if they have any suggestions on how you can deal with this problem.

Start with a Question you are Comfortable With

Some students simply answer all of the questions found on a test in order, but a better approach is to answer a question you are comfortable with first. After you read over the entire test, respond to a question you are 100% sure you know the answer to. This is a good test-taking strategy for a couple of reasons.

- ✓ **It will relax you:** Often, people who experience pre-test anxiety find that it quickly melts away once they have actually started answering the test questions. Answering a question you know is an easy way to put yourself at ease and reduce those feelings of tension and worry.
- ✓ **It will help you feel more confident:** Maintaining a positive attitude while writing a test is just one strategy that can help you do well. Writing the answer to a question that you know is correct will provide you with a quick confidence boost that will hopefully last throughout the test.
- ✓ **It will earn you points:** It may seem obvious, but answering a question you find easy is a simple way to score some quick points and boost your overall grade. It's also a much more productive way to begin an exam than struggling to come up with a response to a question you don't feel as confident about.

After completing that first question, you might start working on the remaining questions based on their values, answering questions worth more points first. Or, you may decide to continue answering questions you know or simply work in order. Whichever approach you take to answering test questions, begin with one you are comfortable with to start the test on a positive note.

Answer all Questions

What should you do if you are unsure about one or more questions on a test? Usually, you should try to answer them anyway. The reason for this is simple: even if you're just making a blind guess, there's a chance you might be right. With true and false questions, you have a 50% chance of guessing the right answer. With multiple choice questions, you will have a 20 to 25% chance of guessing the correct answer if there are four or five choices. If you can eliminate even one answer choice, those percentages jump to 25% and around 33%. For essay or short answer questions, provide some brief points or key phrases that you think relate to the question, even if you can't go into great detail. This is an effective way to get a point or two if you don't know a lot about the topic or are running out of time. After all, a score of 1 or 2 out of 10 is better than not receiving any points at all.

The only time you shouldn't necessarily answer every question is if you will be penalized for a wrong answer. Usually, if you answer a question incorrectly, you simply don't get any credit for that question. In other words, a wrong answer is worth zero. In some cases, however, you will actually have marks deducted for providing an answer that is incorrect. In other words, a wrong answer might be worth -1 or another negative value the instructor has decided upon. If this is the case, guessing is obviously not a good strategy, and you should only answer those questions you are quite sure of.

Maintain your Focus

Since tests and exams are timed, you have to be able to stay focused on the task at hand to complete all of the questions in the allotted amount of time. While many students can do this without any real problems, some individuals are easily distracted. If you know you have trouble concentrating, consider trying the following strategies:

- ✓ **Choose a seat where you won't have visual distractions:** Possible distractions in an exam room can include windows and doors that lead into busy hallways. Desks located in close proximity to the teacher's desk or the location where students will be submitting completed exams are also a bad choice if you are easily distracted. Choose a seat that is as far away from these visual distractions as possible. Another option would be to ask whether you can place your desk in a corner and turn it towards the wall.
- ✓ **Ask if you can write in a separate room:** If you have severe problems maintaining your focus, ask your teacher if it would be possible to write the test in another – preferably empty – room.
- ✓ **Ask if you can place something around your desk to block your view:** Cut a large cardboard box and use it to surround your desk so you won't be tempted to look up from your test paper. Check with your instructor beforehand to see whether this is okay, and be sure to explain your problem.
- ✓ **Consider bringing ear plugs:** Noises that other people can simply block out can be very distracting to students who have trouble focusing. Even pencil sharpeners and the hum of lights can be enough to break some people's concentration. Ear plugs can help you block out these sounds so you can stay focused on your test paper.

Avoid Rushing or Panicking

Rushing and panicking are things that should be avoided at all costs if you hope to do well on a test. Let's take a detailed look at both of these issues.

Rushing

When used in reference to test taking, rushing means that you are hurrying and trying to complete questions as quickly as possible. This can lead to careless mistakes and cause you to leave out important details in your responses.

There are a few reasons why students rush during tests. Some students seem to believe that a test is a contest to see who can finish first. This couldn't be farther from the truth, and students who only use a small portion of their available time often end up with the lowest marks. Plan to use all of the time you are given to ensure all questions are answered thoroughly. Another reason students rush is that they spend too much time on one or two questions, and then find that they have only minutes to complete the remaining sections. This problem can be solved by giving yourself a set amount of time to complete questions and sticking to your plan.

Panicking

When a student panics during an exam, he or she experiences feelings of distress, fright, nervousness, and agitation. These types of feelings have several causes. Some students simply get nervous during tests, regardless of how well prepared they are. Often, some deep breathing is enough to help the student relax. Panic can also set in if a student realizes they don't know an answer to a question. In this case, the student should remind himself that it is just a single question. Not being able to answer it doesn't necessarily mean they are going to fail or get a bad grade. In this case, it's usually best for the student to simply move on to the other questions and come back to the one that is causing them distress. Panic can also set in if a student is running out of time. Again, the best way to address this problem is to use allotted test time wisely.

Use Leftover Time Wisely

If you've paced yourself and maintained your focus while writing that test or exam, you may find that you have a few minutes left over at the end. Some people might use this free time to daydream or look around at the other test takers who are desperately trying to finish before time runs out. Taking full advantage of this time, however, can help you avoid those careless mistakes that can lower your final grade. If you find yourself with 10 minutes left over, here are some ways to use them wisely:

- ✓ **Proofread essays and short answers:** Now that you have some time and aren't rushed, read over essays and short answers. Correct any spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors, make sure your handwriting is legible, and ensure that your answers are complete and make sense.
- ✓ **Check answer sheets:** If you had to record your answers to true and false, multiple choice, and matching questions on a separate sheet, be sure you've done so correctly.
- ✓ **Review questions you weren't sure about:** There may have been some questions you felt unsure about or didn't have time to answer fully. Spare time at the end of the test provides an ideal opportunity to go back and give these questions a second look. Add in any additional details you can to try to improve your grade.
- ✓ **Double check calculations:** While some teachers will provide points for using the correct process to solve a math problem, virtually every teacher will deduct points if you arrive at the wrong answer. Even if you know you've used the right method, run the numbers through the calculator one more time to make sure you haven't made a careless slip of the hand that could cost you points.
- ✓ **Check that all required information has been provided:** Is your name on every page of the test booklet and any other answer sheets? Is your instructor's name and your course section (if requested) recorded on your test paper? Avoid mix-ups and make things as easy as possible for your teacher or professor by double checking that you've included all identifying information asked for.