

Tips for Effective Test-Taking

Before the Test

- Find out about the test. Determine what material will be covered and what types of questions to expect (multiple choice, true-false, short answer, matching, essay). Establish the specific objectives or standards that will be tested. Check whether there is a penalty for guessing, and whether there will be partial credit for essay responses.
- Plan well in advance. A week before the test, commit to spending about 15 to 30 minutes a night reviewing material. Avoid “cramming.” Test takers often find they’re unable to retain information absorbed while cramming, and it may also rob you of valuable rest.
- Make a review sheet that keeps answers and key pieces of information in one handy place.
- Practice answering the types of test questions you expect to encounter on the test. Work the practice questions in your textbooks.
- Gather all the supplies you’re allowed to use during the test—pencils, erasers, pens, rulers, calculator, and so on—and place them where you can be sure to remember to take them with you to the test.
- Be sure you’re well-rested. A recent study has shown that cognitive performance declines with fewer than eight hours of sleep. Some experts recommend getting at least eight hours of sleep each night the entire week before an exam! Come to the test fresh.
- Eat a sensible breakfast the day of the test. Avoid heavy food that might make you sluggish, but don’t come to the test hungry. A nutritious breakfast will give you the energy you need.
- Politely avoid classmates you know to be “worriers.” Anxiety is contagious. Stay positive.
- Wear a watch so you’ll be able to pace yourself.
- Arrive early to the classroom to give yourself enough time to settle in, relax, and reflect before beginning.

Tips for Effective Test-Taking

During the Test

- Pay close attention to directions. Listen closely to the teacher’s spoken instructions, and read all printed directions thoroughly—never assume you know what they say.
- Review the whole test before you start, ensuring your copy is complete. Make a plan to pace yourself based on question types and point values, as well as on degree of difficulty. When you survey the test, jot down brief ideas or concepts that occur to you, especially if you think you might forget them. Ask for explanations of anything you don’t understand.
- Stay focused. Don’t allow yourself to be distracted by others around you, the number of test items, etc. Concentrate on the test items and read each one carefully.
- Answer the easy questions, or the questions you know, first. This helps you build confidence. Skip harder questions, but mark every question you skip so you can find it easily when you return to it.
- Don’t get stuck. Allowing yourself to get hung up on one item can result in a needless waste of time. Save the brain-drain questions until after you’ve answered the items with which you’re most confident.
- If there is no penalty for guessing, remember that guessing at an answer is always preferable to leaving it blank. For example, you have a 50% chance of guessing the correct answer on any true-false item! For multiple-choice questions, physically cross out choices you know to be incorrect; then think the rest through carefully, checking for grammatical clues or absolute words such as “always” and “never.”
- Rephrase difficult questions in your own words—but be careful not to change the meaning.
- Make a map of how you will answer an essay question by jotting an outline of what you want to say in the order you want to say it. Note any important points or details.
- Neatness does count. Be sure your letters look like letters and your numerals look like numerals. Don’t cheat yourself out of points because you’ve written something the grader can’t read.
- Use all of the time allotted. If you finish early, resist the impulse to turn your paper in and rush out. Review the whole test, making sure that you have in fact answered every question you can possibly answer. Check to make sure the responses on your answer sheet match the test items; mis-marking an answer sheet can be disastrous. Reread your essays and pay attention to grammar and spelling.
- Take time to do a brief analysis of how you managed your performance and make a mental note of it for the next test. Did you budget your time well? How did following directions help you do your best? What helped you have a positive attitude? What types of questions stumped you? What can you do to equip yourself better for the next test?