

Improving Exam Preparation Strategies
Rick Grossman, Learning Strategies Specialist
Tompkins Cortland Community College

Test Anxiety

Many students experience severe test anxiety, when there is such an extreme stress level that a number of significant physical and/or emotional responses occur before or during a test. Whatever the level of test anxiety a student has, there are things they can do to take control and improve the situation.

First, most experts agree that mild to moderate test anxiety is often due to past experiences and/or lack of preparation. So, one of the most powerful ways to reduce test stress is for a student to find better ways to assess what will be on an test and to prepare for it effectively (more on this below). Another way to manage test anxiety is to learn relaxation techniques (e.g., breathing exercises, positive self-talk, guided visualizations), so a student can deal with the anxiety when it starts to interfere. A student can learn these techniques from a counselor, a learning specialist, or from the internet. If a student has experienced extreme anxiety reactions (like nausea or panic), it is recommended that they discuss this with a professional.

Test Preparation Strategies

It can be very valuable for a student to find out as much as they can about how an instructor tests and what his/her rules are for testing. Also, it's important to know what percentage of the total grade the test is worth. A student can start by looking at the course syllabus for any relevant information. Additional information can be obtained from the instructor, former students, or tutors (e.g., what types of questions will I be asked, how long will I have to complete the test, what happens if I run out of time). Some instructors do not want to take class time to discuss these details, but they are very willing to cover them after class or during office hours.

A key strategy for preparing for exams is to try to predict test questions and practice answering them. Whether a student is self-quizzing by writing or reciting (or both), they are giving themselves an opportunity to try to perform in a simulated exam situation. This effort can help a student to focus their test preparation efforts and reduce stress. A study group or partner can be ideal, both for coming up with possible test questions and for practicing (and analyzing) the answers. Prior exams and quizzes can also be used to help determine the possible style and wording of questions (more on this below).

Predicting Exam Questions

For each topic, ask yourself: "What do I need to know or be able to do?"

Then ask: "How do I know I've learned this or can do it?"

Finally: "Have I learned this in enough detail?"

Information often falls into the following categories – who, what, when, where, how (process, procedure), why (reason, cause), result (effect), definition, example, ways, types, similarities (comparison), differences (contrast), advantages (benefits), disadvantages (drawbacks). A student can use these categories when they look at the topics and main points to help them organize the material and generate possible questions.

The Exam Study Plan

The following strategy may be useful for helping students plan their exam review sessions more efficiently and effectively. The "Exam Study Plan" is a chart that a student (or group of students) can prepare to help gather and organize possible test material, predict test questions, and plan review sessions.

To create an exam study plan, make a chart with six columns (you may want to use your paper sideways or tape two sheets together). In column #1, list the topics and sub-topics needed to review (e.g., "textbook reading and marking"). In column #2, across from the list of topics, put the list of main points in essay or question format (e.g., "define SQ4R" or "What is SQ4R"? and "List and explain the steps in SQ4R"). In column #3, put all of the resources available to use in answering this question (e.g., "notes pp. 34-35, book chapter 8, pp. 137-143, handout #7"). In column #4, put the strategy you will use to study that specific material (e.g., make study cards). In column #5, put the estimated amount of time you will need to spend on this chunk of material (e.g., "2 hours"). In the last column, #6, put a sub-deadline date (e.g., "Do by Wed., 10/6").

A student can modify this approach to meet their own needs. The key is that a student has the test material laid out in smaller, more manageable chunks and can monitor their own progress towards more clearly defined goals (both in terms of time spent and study methods used.) This can also be very helpful for reducing procrastination and for avoiding underestimating the time needed to prepare for an exam.

The Exam Analysis Procedure

A very effective procedure for improving test performance is the "Exam Analysis Procedure". In preparation for an upcoming test, a student looks over their previous quizzes and tests for that course. (If the instructor doesn't give back the exams, a student can ask the instructor to go over them in his/her office.) The key is for the student to look for patterns in the tests – both in the tests' style and in the student's performance. It is important for a student not only to look at what they got right and wrong, but also to look beyond that to the source, style, and depth of the questions.

Consider the following for all questions:

1. What was the source of the answer to this question? (Did the answer come from the textbook, lecture notes, handout, video, reserve materials, etc.?) The answer to this question may lead to an increased or decreased emphasis on certain sources for future exams.
2. What was the style of the question? (Was it essay, multiple choice, short answer AND, more importantly, was it asking for a definition, an example, a cause, a result, a comparison, etc.) The answer to this question can help in more accurately predicting the types of test questions in future preparation efforts.
3. What was the level of depth/detail needed to answer the question correctly (multiple choice) or completely (essay)? The answer to this question can help ensure that the preparation efforts (both questions asked and answers given) are done in sufficient detail.

In short, this process can help a student better determine both what material to study for future tests and how to go about studying it. Of course, it also makes sense for a student to take note of the specific material that they got wrong and try to go back and learn it. It is likely to either "come around" again on a later test or be the key to understanding something later in the course!