

Improving Exam Taking Strategies

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GENERAL STRATEGIES

Just before the Exam is Handed Out:

In general, any routine a student plans and follows that makes them feel in control of the situation will likely be helpful.

Many students report that the 10-15 minutes before an exam is very stressful. Sometimes, a student's stress is compounded by being surrounded by a lot of other nervous students. If so, a student may want to consider coming as early as possible, claiming their seat, and getting out of the room until test time. While the student is out of the room, they might consider having some kind of a routine to follow (e.g., bathroom, drink, and a brief time outside for fresh air).

If a student elects to do a last-minute review, it is often best for them to consider preparing a review sheet or study cards in advance with something they are certain will be on the exam. Many students indicate that just scanning their notes or book is a bad plan. This is because a student may see something they think they should have studied more or missed completely, causing some anxiety. Sitting next to a friend or right by the door is usually not advised; both can be very distracting.

When You First Get the Test:

Experts agree that there is no right or wrong procedure here. Again, students often benefit from having a plan so that they will feel in control. Many students briefly survey the exam first, reading general directions and getting the whole picture. Others will find a blank space on the test paper and write down some formulas, key information, etc. before ever looking at the test (e.g., drawing and labeling the parts of a plant and an animal cell in biology). Some students try the easiest questions first; others do the toughest ones first. Some read the essays and then do the multiple-choice questions hoping to find some useful information. Others do the essays first, figuring that they would rather be rushed on the multiple choice questions, if time runs short.

Here is a strategy that might prove useful - the "Exam Time and Order Plan". This plan involves surveying the test and planning both the order in which the student will complete the items and the approximate amount of time to allot to each item. Whether or not a student is concerned about finishing an exam in the allotted time, this strategy can be beneficial. It is very difficult to gauge elapsed time during an exam. In addition, people leaving the exam early may cause some distraction and stress. For example, a student has surveyed the exam and has 2 short essays and 20 multiple choice questions to complete. They have 50 minutes to complete the exam. They make a tentative plan - "I'll do the 2 short essays first; I have about 10 minutes to do each ($2 \times 10 = 20$ min.) Then, I'll do the multiple choice for 20 minutes ($1 \times 20 = 20$)." That leaves me 10 minutes to spare." That's the plan. So, if a student is working through the exam and thinks "I think I've spent too much time on this first essay". At that point, they check their watch and sees they have spent 15 minutes - yes, they verify that are running behind. Or, they check their watch and only 8 minutes have gone by - no, they have confirmed that they are doing fine on time. Another situation is if another student finishes in 25 minutes, the student who made the plan can how much time has passed and make an accurate assessment of their own time situation.

As You Work Through the Test:

A student may want to ask the instructor for help if they are unclear about what a question is asking for or if they are unsure their answer is sufficient. A student has nothing to lose and everything to gain by asking.

Before You Hand in the Test:

As obvious as it seems, it makes good sense for a student to re-read the directions to be sure they have answered the appropriate number of questions and have done so in the correct way. A student should check to make sure each item is clearly numbered and labeled. If time allows, it makes sense to re-organize and re-write any essays as neatly as possible.

ESSAY TEST STRATEGIES

Read the directions carefully at least two or three times. It is not uncommon for a student to lose points because they did not answer exactly the right question or they left out a part of the answer (e.g., putting the definition, but forgetting the example; putting the causes, but forgetting to put the effects).

Don't forget to put in the basic material (e.g., definitions, descriptions, examples), even though it seems obvious. The instructor usually wants to see that a student has clearly understood this material. Again, a student should consider asking the instructor if they are not certain whether this material should be included. In general, more detail is better than less.

If a student is running out of time, it can be worthwhile to simply jot down anything they can - an outline, key words and phrases, etc. Most instructors are looking for anything they can find so they can see a student has some understanding of the material and can give partial credit.

Consider the following essay answer strategy:

1. Read the question, mark the key words, and read it again.
2. Brainstorm information for the answer. Jot down the information on scrap paper.
3. Re-read the question to make sure you are on track.
4. Condense and organize the brainstormed information. Put similar items together and order the information.
5. Write the essay. Immediately jot down on scrap paper any new information that comes to mind while writing.
6. Re-read the question to make sure you have answered all parts completely.
7. Proofread the essay checking for complete sentences, spelling, punctuation, etc.
8. If time allows, re-write the essay as neatly as possible.

MULTIPLE CHOICE TEST STRATEGIES

Consider reading the stem (question part) twice. If a student can mark on the test paper, it can be valuable to read the stem once, go back to mark the key terms, and then re-read the stem a second time. Key terms include negative words (not, except, etc.) and direction words (example, definition, causes, etc.). Covering up the choices (answers) when reading the stem helps many students stay focused. A student can also try to answer the question from their memory and then compare that to the choices given. If a student uncovers the choices one at a time, they may find it less confusing and more likely they will consider all the possibilities. Cross off or mark ("X" to cross off, T for "true", F for "false", ? for "maybe") each choice as you go along. Doing this keeps a student more involved and, therefore, less distracted. An effective strategy is to circle the number of any question a student wants to come back to. The issue of changing answers comes up often. As obvious as it seems, it not advisable to change answers without a rationale. To clarify, don't change an answer just because you now think "C" is a better answer than "D". Ask yourself: "Why do I like "C" better than "D" now?" If you can give a logical answer, then make the change. Otherwise, leave your original choice and move on.