

Topic: Improving Exam Preparation Strategies

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THOUGHTS ON TEST ANXIETY:

Test anxiety is an issue that comes up all the time in my one-on-one work with students here at TC3. Lots of students experience some level of stress near or at test time. Test anxiety is when there is such an extreme stress level that a number of severe physical and/or emotional responses occur. Whether you have test anxiety or test stress, there are things you can do to take control and improve the situation.

Let me offer some thoughts in this area based on my experience. First, I think it is important to say I agree with most experts that much of what I see is mild to moderate stress due to past experiences and/or lack of preparation. So, one of the ways to reduce test anxiety is to find better ways to assess what will be on an exam and prepare for it effectively (more below). Another way is to learn techniques for relaxation, like breathing exercises, positive self talk, and guided visualizations, so the student can deal with the stress when it starts to interfere.

If a student, however, has experienced extreme stress reactions (like nausea or panic), I refer them to our college counselors (their services are free). They are very experienced and skilled at helping students to deal with this. So, to make a long story a little longer, I recommend that you get professional help if you have this kind of severe trouble.

GENERAL TEST PREPARATION STRATEGIES:

It can be very valuable to find out as much as you can about how an instructor tests and what his/her rules are for testing. Look at your syllabus first for any relevant information. Try to get any information you can from the instructor, former students, or tutors. What types of questions will be asked? How long do you have to complete the test (and what happens if you run out of time)? Some instructors do not like to take class time to discuss these details but 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 then practice answering them. You can see the connection here to both the Cornell note taking system and SQ4R (see lecture note taking and textbook reading handouts). If you've been making Cornell notes and/or study cards from lectures and texts, you have much of this work done already! Whether you are writing or reciting, you are giving yourself an opportunity to try to perform in a simulated exam situation. This effort can help you focus your 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 be used to help determine the possible style and wording of questions.

Some specifics on predicting exam questions:

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

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

A related question is: "Do I know this in enough detail?"

Information often falls into the following categories – who, what, when, where, why, how, definition, example. You can use these categories to look at the topics and main points to help you organize the material and generate questions.

THE EXAM STUDY PLAN:

For some students, procrastination causes concerns. For others, under-estimating the time needed to prepare creates problems. The following strategy - the exam study plan - may be useful for those problems as well as others.

The basic plan is to record the topics, sub-topics, and main points needed to review all on one chart (you can make a sheet for each chapter or topic, if you prefer). This will give you the big picture, complete with chapter numbers, note page numbers, related handouts, estimated time to complete, deadline date, etc. From this chart you can more efficiently and effectively plan your exam review.

Make a chart with 5 columns (you may need to use your paper sideways or tape two sheets together). In column #1, list the topics and sub-topics needed to review (like "textbook reading and marking"). In column #2, across from the list of topics, put the list of main points in essay or question format (like "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 (like "notes pp. 34-35, book chapter 8, pp. 137-143, handout #7"). In column #4, put an estimated amount of time you will need to spend on this chunk of material (like "2 hours"). In the last column, #5, put a sub-deadline date (like "do by Wed., 10/6").

You can modify this approach to meet your own needs. The keys are that you have the material laid out in smaller, more manageable chunks and you can monitor your progress toward a more clearly defined goal (both in terms of time and information.)

THE EXAM ANALYSIS PROCEDURE:

Students regularly come to me in the Baker Center for Learning looking for ways to improve their test performance. One approach I use is called an exam analysis. Together, we look over the student's previous quizzes and tests in the course they are concerned with. (If the instructor doesn't give back the exams, I arrange to have them sent to me. You can also ask the instructor to go over them with you in his/her office.) We look for patterns in the test and in the student's performance. Of course we look at what the student got right and wrong, but we also look beyond just the rights and wrongs. We consider the following:

1. What was the source of the answer to this question? (Was it in the text, 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? (Both 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 and how to study it. Of course, it makes sense to take note of the specific material that you 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!