

Topic: Improving Exam Preparation Strategies

Rick Grossman, TC3 Learning Strategies Specialist

THOUGHTS ON TEST ANXIETY:

Test anxiety is an issue that comes up all of 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. A much smaller number of students experience true test anxiety, when there is such an extreme stress level that a number of severe physical and/or emotional responses occur (before and/or during the test). Whether a student has test anxiety or test stress, there are things they 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 that I agree with most experts; much of what I see is mild to moderate stress 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 prepare for it effectively (more below). Another way to manage test stress is to learn relaxation techniques (e.g., breathing exercises, positive self-talk, guided visualizations), so a student can deal with the stress when it starts to interfere. A student can learn these techniques from a counselor or from me.

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

GENERAL 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. Look at the syllabus first for any relevant information. Try to get any additional information from the instructor, former students, or tutors. For example: "What types of questions will be asked?" "How long do I have to complete the test (and what happens if I run out of time)?" Some instructors do not like 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 then practice answering them. There is a connection here to both the Cornell note taking system and SQ4R (refer to lecture note taking and textbook reading handouts). If a student has been making Cornell notes and/or study cards from lectures and texts, they have much of this work done already! 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 (see below).

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 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 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 (a student can make a sheet for each chapter or topic, if they prefer). This will give a student the big picture, complete with chapter numbers, note page numbers, related handouts, estimated time to complete, deadline date, etc. From this chart, a student can more efficiently and effectively plan their exam review.

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 keys are that a student has the material laid out in smaller, more manageable chunks and can monitor their own progress toward a more clearly defined goal (both in terms of time and information.)

THE EXAM ANALYSIS PROCEDURE:

Students regularly come to me 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. A student can also ask the instructor to go over them 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? (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 and how to study it. Of course, it 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!