

Topic: Improving Exam Taking Strategies

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GENERAL STRATEGIES

Just Before The Exam Is Handed Out:

In general, anything a student plans that makes them feel in control of the situation will 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, I suggest that a student consider coming as early as possible, staking out their seat, and getting out of the room. A student might consider having some kind of a routine to follow just before the exam - bathroom, drink, and breath of fresh air, for example.

If a student decides to do a last-minute review, I encourage 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 a lot of anxiety.

Sitting near a friend is usually not wise; it can be very distracting.

When You First Get The Test:

There is no right or wrong procedure here. Again, I advise having a plan so a student 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 (for instance, 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.

Whether or not a student is concerned about finishing an exam in the allotted time, this strategy makes sense. It is very difficult to gauge elapsed time during an exam. In addition, people leaving the exam early may cause confusion and stress. So, try to make a plan for the timing and order. For example, let's say you have surveyed the exam and have 2 short essays and 20 multiple choice questions. You have 50 minutes to complete the exam. You make a 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, you are working through the exam and you go "Oh, my gosh- I think I've spent too much time on this first essay. You check you watch and see you have spent 15 minutes - yes, you are running behind. Or, you check your watch and only 8 minutes have gone by - no, you are doing fine. Or someone leaves after 25 minutes and you have an "Oh, my gosh, I'm not going to finish" attack. Again, you can see where you are and how much time is gone and make an accurate assessment.

As You Work Through The Test:

A student can ask the instructor for help if they are unclear about what a question is asking for or if they are unsure your 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. Check to make sure each item is clearly numbered and labeled. If time allows, re-organize and re-write any essays as neatly as possible. The research shows, and my personal experience confirms, that this effort pays off.

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. For example: putting the definition but forgetting the example, or putting the causes and 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 you have clearly understood this material. Again, I encourage a student to ask the instructor if they are not certain whether this material should be included.

If a student is running out of time, I suggest they 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 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. Put similar items together and order the information.
5. Write the essay. Immediately jot down 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, I advise that they read first, going back to mark the key terms, and then re-read. 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 (/ 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. I encourage a student to circle the number of any question they need to come back to.

The issue of changing answers comes up often. Here's what I say, based on my experience. As obvious as it may seem, I urge students not to change answers without a rationale. What I mean is, don't change an answer just because you now think "C" is a better answer. 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.