

What to Do: During the Test

Tips for Test-Taking

In General:

- ❑ **Deal with Anxiety.** Allow yourself a minute or two of “panic time”. During this time, notice how you are feeling and then let go of your anxiety. There are several techniques you can use to help you relax like breathing exercises and visualizations. Whichever strategy best helps you manage stress should be something you can do quickly and in the moments before you begin your test. Too much anxiety can make recalling information more difficult.
- ❑ **Manage your Time.** Answer multiple choice, true/false, and fill-in-the-blank questions first. Save short answer and essay questions until after you have answered other types of questions. Plan how you will use your time and make sure to leave yourself plenty of time for essay questions because they are usually worth the largest portion of your test grade. Designate time for each section based on the proportional worth of that section; allow the most time for the sections that are worth the most and less time for sections that are worth less.
- ❑ **Pace Yourself.** Answer what you know first and move on when you get stuck. If you spend too much time trying to figure out an answer you are unsure of or trying to recall information you cannot, your anxiety level may rise making it difficult to recall the answers to questions you know. To avoid this postpone the search for those answers until you have answered most of the other questions.
- ❑ **Look for Answers in Other Questions.** Important terms, dates, and other facts often appear more than once on an exam. When you are stuck on a question, look for cues in other questions.
- ❑ **Trust Your Instincts.** On multiple choice type questions your first instinct is usually best. Be sure to read questions and choices carefully. If you find that you misunderstood the question or your answer selection on your first read then change it if you think it is incorrect.

Multiple Choice Questions

- ❑ **Read questions and directions carefully.** Some questions will call for multiple answers. Others may ask for the choice which is not a correct answer to the question. Make sure you know what the test is asking you to do before trying to select an answer.
- ❑ **Answer questions in your head before looking at the possible answers.** If you can come up with the answer before looking at the choice then there is less of a chance that those choices will confuse you.
- ❑ **Read all of the choices before choosing your answer.** Sometimes two similar choices will be listed but only one of them is correct. By reading all of the possible answers you reduce the risk of being misled by an incorrect answer.
- ❑ **It never makes sense not to guess.** Even if you have absolutely no idea what the correct answer is, you can usually pick out at least one incorrect answer. This knowledge is enough to significantly improve the accuracy of your guessing. Even when incorrect answers will deduct points from your total score, guessing is usually better than leaving a question unanswered. If you have attended class, taken notes, and studied for your exam, you won't be guessing blindly even if you don't have a clue what the answer is. Use the following guidelines to guess more accurately:
 - **If two answers are similar, except for one or two words, choose one of these answers**
 - **If two answers have similar-sounding or similar-looking words (e.g. intermittent,**

intermediate), choose one of these answers.

- **If the answer calls for a sentence completion, eliminate the answers that would not form grammatically correct sentences.**
- **If two quantities are almost the same, choose one.**
- **If answers cover a wide range (e.g. 4.5, 66.7, 88.7, 90.1, 5000.1), choose one in the middle of the range.**
- **If none of the above techniques apply, choose the longest answer.**
- **If all else fails, close your eyes and pick an answer.**

(These guidelines should not replace effective and thorough studying)

True/False Questions

- **Answer quickly.** Often these questions are not worth very many points individually. If they are however then spend time proportionate to their worth.
- **Read Carefully.** Sometimes one word can make a statement inaccurate. If any part of the statement is false the entire statement is false. Don't get stuck between true and false, if it isn't completely true, then it is false.
- **Look for qualifiers.** Words like all, most, sometimes, never, and rarely are qualifiers. Often the truth of a statement will depend upon a qualifier. Absolute qualifiers such as always or never generally indicate false statements. Even if a statement is true without its qualifier, once a false qualifier is attached, the statement is false.

Machine-Graded Tests

- **Check your answers.** Mark answers in your test booklet as well as on your answer sheet. Doing so will make checking your answer sheet much easier. Makes sure that your answers correspond to the correct questions. Check the test booklet against the answer sheet whenever you switch sections and whenever you come to the top of a column.
- **Watch for stray marks.** Stray marks can be confused for incorrect answers, so keep your answer sheet neat and make sure your answers are filled in properly.

Open-Book Tests

- **Preparation matters.** Open-book tests are tests that require studying and organization and they are often more difficult than closed-book exams. The better prepared you are for an open-book exam the less time you will waste searching for the information that will help you answer the questions. The following are some strategies to prepare for open-book exams:
 - **Write down formulas that you'll need on a separate sheet of paper.** This strategy will help you by putting information that you know you will need in one easy-to-find location.
 - **Use post-it notes or paper clips to mark important pages of the book.** Mark pages with tables or summaries of important information. Marking pages will stop you from wasting time flipping through the pages of your book.
 - **Organize your notes.** If you are able to bring notes to your exam, number the pages and write yourself a brief table of contents. You may also want to highlight particularly important or useful sections to make them easier to find.

Short-Answer/ Fill-in-the-Blank Questions

- ❑ **Concentrate on key words and facts.** Be brief, these questions often ask for definitions or short descriptions. Focus on answering the question with direct language and informative sentences.
- ❑ **You can never know too much.** Studies show that “over-learning” really pays off. If you know a subject backward and forward, you’ll be able to answer short-answer questions as quickly as you can write.

Essay Questions

- ❑ **Find out what the question is asking--precisely.**
 - **Analyze:** Break into separate parts and discuss, examine, or interpret each part.
 - **Compare:** Examine two or more things. Identify similarities (and most often differences as well).
 - **Contrast:** Show differences. Set in opposition.
 - **Criticize:** Make judgments. Evaluate comparative worth. Criticism often involves analysis.
 - **Define:** Give the meaning; usually a meaning specific to the course or subject. Explain the exact meaning. Definitions are usually direct and/or brief.
 - **Describe:** Give a detailed account. Make a picture with words. List characteristics, qualities, and parts.
 - **Discuss:** Consider and debate or argue the pros and cons of an issue. Write about conflict. Compare and contrast.
 - **Enumerate:** List several ideas, aspects, events, things, qualities, reasons, etc.
 - **Evaluate:** Give your opinion or cite the opinion of an expert. Include evidence to support the evaluation.
 - **Explain:** Make an idea clear. Show logically how a concept is developed. Give the reasons for an event.
 - **Illustrate:** Give concrete examples. Explain clearly by using comparisons or examples.
 - **Interpret:** Comment upon, give examples, describe relationships. Explain the meaning. Describe, then Evaluate.
 - **Outline:** Describe main ideas, characteristics or events. (Does not necessarily mean “write a Roman Numeral outline”)
 - **Prove:** Support with facts (especially facts presented in class or in the text).
 - **Relate:** Show the connections between ideas or events. Provide a larger context.
 - **State:** Explain precisely.
 - **Summarize:** Give a brief, condensed account. Include conclusions. Avoid unnecessary details.
 - **Trace:** Show the order of events or progress of a subject or event.
- ❑ **Write a quick outline.** This technique may help you write faster by continuously writing rather than pausing to think and plan while you write. You will probably be less likely to leave out important facts. Also, if you do not complete your essay then the completed outline may win you some points. You will likely write a better essay if you know what you want to write before you begin.
 - ❑ **Get to the point.** On test essays, professors are rarely looking for stylized prose but direct and informed answer to their questions. Try not to find your point by writing “fluff” sentences, but take that minute or two to plan out your essay, either mentally or in an

outline.

- ❑ **Include parts of the question in your answer.** This is a great way to keep your essay focused and make your answer to the question clear. You may want to begin your essay this way and reiterate the point at the end of the essay also.
- ❑ **Start with your most solid points.** This technique is particularly important in a time crunch. When you feel most pressured for time, include your strongest points first in case you run out of time. When you have enough time, the strongest essays usually begin with a moderately strong point and lead up to the strongest point, including the lesser point in the middle of the essay. However this structural issue is minor and it is always best to make sure that you've included your strongest points.
- ❑ **Write legibly.** While most professors try to grade as objectively as possible and may even grade your essays blindly, grading essays is largely a subjective process. There are rarely purely wrong and purely right answers. Sloppy or difficult-to-read handwriting is frustrating and might actually lower your grade.
- ❑ **Use a pen.** Many instructors will require you to do so because pencil smudges and is difficult to read. It is also in your best interest to use a pen with black or dark blue ink because they are the clearest on the page.
- ❑ **Write on one side of the page only.** Writing on both sides of the page may cause ink to bleed through onto the opposite side of each page. Answers are clearest and easiest to read when only written on one side of page. Use those blank sides of the page if you need to fill in information that you left out. For the same reason, leave generous spaces between multiple essays or questions.

Modified from:

Ellis, Dave. *Becoming a Master Student*. 8th ed. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998.