

Test Taking Tips

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Test Taking Strategies

Tests are often a blend of several types of questions. Review and practice these strategies for various question types.

True-False

- Circle key words in the question.
- Remember: If any part of the answer is false, the whole thing is false.
- Watch for words like "never," "always," "every," "all," "none," and "only"; they generally indicate a false answer.
- Never leave a blank - a guess has a 50-50 chance of being right.

Multiple Choices

- Read the whole question carefully and try to decide what the answer is before reading any of the options.
- Read all of the answer options, and then choose the one that most closely matches her answer.
- When unsure, eliminate answers that are clearly incorrect.
- If forced to guess, choose the longest, most detailed answer.

Open Book Tests

Introduction

In an open book exam you are evaluated on understanding rather than recall and memorization. You will be expected to:

- Apply material to new situations
- Analyze elements and relationships
- Synthesize or structure
- Evaluate using your material as evidence

Access to content (books, notes, etc.) varies by instructor. The exam can be taken home or in the classroom, with questions seen or unseen before exam time.

Do not underestimate the preparation needed for an open book exam: your time will be limited, so the key is proper organization in order to quickly find data, quotes, examples, and/or arguments you use in your answers.

Organize your reference materials Your "Open Book

Make your reference materials as user-friendly as possible so that you don't lose time locating what you need

- Familiarize yourself with the format, layout and structure of your textbooks and source materials
- Organize these with your class notes for speedy retrieval and index ideas and concepts with pointers and/or page numbers in the source material. Develop a system of tabs/sticky notes, color-coding, concept maps, etc. to mark important summaries, headings and sections.
- Write short, manageable summaries of content for each grouping
- List our data and formulas separately for easy access.

Test Taking

- Read the questions carefully to understand what is expected. Refer to our *Guide on Essay Exam Terms/Directives*.
- Make good use of time. Quickly review the number of questions and note how much time each could take. First answer the questions that you are confident of and/or for which you will not need much time checking the resources. Leave more complex and difficult questions for later.
- Don't over-answer. Aim for concise, accurate, thoughtful answers that are based in evidence.

Use Quotations

- To illustrate a point, or act as a discussion point
- To draw on the authority of the source
- Because you could not say it better

The Essay Exam

Before Writing out the Exam

Set up a time schedule to answer each question and to review/edit all questions.

- If six questions are to be answered in sixty minutes, allow yourself only seven minutes for each
- If questions are "weighted," prioritize that into your time allocation for each question
- When the time is up for one question, stop writing, leave space and begin the next question. The incomplete answers can be completed during the review time
- Six incomplete answers will usually receive more credit than three complete ones

Read through the questions once and note if you have any choice in answering questions.

- Pay attention to how the question is phrased or to the "directives" or words such as "compare," "contrast," "criticize," etc.
- Answers will come to mind immediately for some questions

Write down their key words, listings, etc. as they are fresh in mind. Otherwise these ideas may be blocked (or be unavailable) when the time comes to write the later questions. This will reduce "clutching" or panic (anxiety, actually fear which disrupts thoughts).

Before attempting to answer a question, put it in your own words.

Now compare your version with the original. Do they mean the same thing? If they don't, you've misread the question. You'll be surprised how often they don't agree.

Think before you write. Make a brief outline for each question. Number the items in the order you will discuss them.

- Get right to the point. State your main point in the first sentence. Use your first paragraph to provide an overview of your essay. Use the rest of your essay to discuss these points in more detail. Back up your points with specific information, examples or quotations from your reading and notes.
- Teachers are influenced by compactness, completeness and clarity of an organized answer
- Writing in the hope that the right answer will somehow turn up is time-consuming and usually futile
- To know a little and to present that little well is, by and large, superior to knowing much and presenting it poorly, when judged by the grade received

Writing and Answering

Begin with a strong first sentence that states the main idea of your essay. Continue this first paragraph by presenting key points.

Develop Your Argument

- Begin each paragraph with a key point from the introduction
- Develop each point in a complete paragraph
- Use transitions or enumerate to connect your points
- Hold to your time allocation and organization
- Avoid very definite statements when possible; a qualified statement connotes a philosophic attitude, the mark of an educated person
- Qualify answers when in doubt. It is better to say "toward the end of the 19th century" than to say "in 1894" when you can't remember, whether it's 1884 or 1894. In many cases, the approximate time is all that is wanted; unfortunately 1894, though approximate, may be incorrect and will usually be marked accordingly.

Summarize in our last paragraph. Restate your central idea and indicate why it is important.

Review

Complete questions left incomplete, but allow time to review all questions.

Review, edit, correct misspellings, incomplete words and sentences, miswritten dates and numbers.

Not Enough Time? Outline your answers.

Short Answer Tests

An instructor's primary purpose in giving a short-answer test is to cover the material. Go over your notes and the assigned reading:

- Prepare for the test by studying off of summary sheets that are packed with information within condensed space. Try to categorize the material.
- Use grammatical clues within a statement as hints for the correct answer
- If you can think of several answers for a blank or short answer question, let the instructor know. The instructor may give you a clue to the correct answer he/she is looking for
- A guess made with common sense could get you more test points than if you leave an answer blank. Don't be a smart aleck if you guess.
- Write your short answers in simple, telegraphic sentences. Packing as much information as you can is more important than literary style.

Multiple Choice Tests

Multiple choice questions usually include a phrase or stem followed by three to five options:

Test Strategies

- Read the directions carefully
- Know if each question has one or more correct options
- Know if you are penalized for guessing
- Answer easy questions first

Answer Options

Improve your odds; think critically. Cover the options, read the stem and try to answer. Treat each option as a true-false question and choose the "most true." Select the option that most closely matches your answer.

Strategies to Answer Difficult Questions

- Eliminate options you know to be incorrect
- Question options that grammatically don't fit with the stem
- Question options that are totally unfamiliar to you
- Question options that contain negative or absolute words. Try substituting a qualified term for the absolute one, like "frequently" for "always" or "typical" for "every" to see if you can eliminate it.
- If you know two of three options seem correct, "all of the above" is a strong possibility
- Toss out the high and low and consider the middle range numbers
- In the case of "look alike options," probably one is correct. Choose the best, but eliminate choices that mean basically the same thing and thus cancel each other out.
- Echo options: if two options are opposite each other, chances are one of them is correct
- Favor options that contain qualifiers: the result is longer, more inclusive items that better fill the role of the answer
- If two alternatives seem correct, compare them for differences, then refer to the stem to find your best answer

Guessing

- Always guess when there is no penalty for guessing or you can eliminate options
- Don't guess if you are penalized for guessing and if you have no basis for your choice
- Don't change your answers unless you are sure of the correction
- Use hints from questions you know to answer questions you do not know.

True/False Tests

Every part of a true sentence must be "true." If any part of the sentence is false, the whole sentence is false despite many other true statements.

Pay close attention to negatives, qualifiers, absolutes and long strings of statements.

Negatives can be confusing. If the question contains negatives such as "no, not, cannot," drop the negative and read what remains. Decide whether that sentence is true or false. If it is true, its opposite (or negative) is usually false.

Qualifiers are words that restrict or open up general statements. Words like "sometimes, often, frequently, ordinarily, generally," open up the possibilities of making accurate statements. They make more modest claims, are more likely to reflect reality, and usually indicate "true" answers.

Absolute words restrict possibilities. "No, never, none, always, every, entirely, only" imply the statement must be true 100 percent of the time and usually indicate "false" answers.

Long sentences often include groups of words set off by punctuation. Pay attention to the "truth" of each of these phrases. If one is false, it usually indicates a "false" answer.

Guessing

Often true/false tests contain more true answers than false answers. You have more than a 50 percent chance of being right with "true." However, your teacher may be the opposite. Review past tests for patterns.

Tips for Better Test Taking

When you take a test, you are demonstrating your ability to understand course material or perform certain tasks. Successful test taking avoids carelessness.

Examples of objective tests are true/false, multiple choice, and fill-in-the-blank.

Examples of subjective tests are short answer, essay, or oral exams.

NB: If you have any doubts about the fairness of tests, or of the ability of tests to measure your performance, please see your academic counseling service.

These suggestions may help you avoid careless errors!

Prepare

- Arrive early for tests. Bring all the materials you will need, such as pencils and pens, a calculator, a dictionary and a watch. This helps you focus on the task at hand.
- Be comfortable, but alert. Choose a good spot and make sure you have enough room to work. Maintain comfortable posture, but don't slouch.
- Stay relaxed and confident. Remind yourself that you are well prepared and you are going to do well. If you find yourself anxious, take several slow, deep breaths to relax. Don't talk about the test to other students just before taking the test; anxiety is contagious.

Test Taking

- Read the directions carefully. This may be obvious, but it will help you avoid careless errors. If there is time, quickly look through the test for an overview. Note key terms and jot down brief notes.
- Answer Questions in a Strategic Order:
 1. Answer the easy questions first. It may help you to make associations with more difficult questions and will help build confidence, score points and mentally orient yourself to vocabulary, concepts and your studies.
 2. Difficult questions or questions with the most point values should be answered next. With objective tests, first eliminate those answers you know to be wrong, or are likely to be wrong, don't seem to fit or where two options are so similar as to be both incorrect. With essay/subjective questions, broadly outline your answers and sequence the order of your points.

Review

- Resist the urge to leave as soon as you have completed all the items.
- Review your test to make sure that you have answered all questions, not mis-marked the answer sheet or made a simple mistake.
- Proofread your writing for spelling, grammar, punctuation, decimal points, etc.
- Do not "second-guess" yourself and change your original answers. Research has indicated that your first hunch is more likely to be correct. You should only change answers to questions if you originally misread them or if you have encountered information elsewhere in the test that indicates with certainty that your first choice is incorrect.
- Analyze your test results. Each test can further prepare you for the next test. Use your tests to review when studying for final exams.
- Decide on and adopt study strategies that worked best for you. Identify those that didn't work well and replace them.

Twelve Words That Trip Up Students

Research has shown that the following 12 Words trip up students when used in a question on a test. In an effort to help students become familiar with and more at ease when faced with these terms, we have simplified the terms into words students use more frequently and generally have a better understanding. Integrating this 12 Word List into your daily instruction can help your students become more successful test takers in the future.

1. **Trace** - Follow up, step-by-step, from the beginning to the end, list the steps.
2. **Analyze** - Take apart, tell me the good and the bad, break it down.
3. **Infer** - Read between the lines, make an educated guess, what do you think they are really trying to say?
4. **Evaluate** - Rate, grade, score or judge it.
5. **Formulate** - Create, come up with, build, show me in words what it means.
6. **Describe** - Paint a picture in words, tell me all about it.
7. **Support** - Back it up, prove it, give me the reasons, give me some facts.
8. **Explain** - In your own words, tell me about it, give your opinion
9. **Summarize** - Recap in a few sentences, give me the main ideas in a few sentences
10. **Compare** - Tell how all the things are alike.
11. **Contrast** - Tell how all the things are different.
12. **Predict** - Give me your best guess, look ahead and tell me what you think will happen.